

**A happy personality depends mostly on YOUR THOUGHTS, NOT your genetics**

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### **Abstract**

Happiness is one of the most profound desires and purposes of human life. Many have tried to solve the mystery of happiness from philosophers thousands of years ago to psychologists more recently. Many made significant progress but no one managed to come to a satisfying theory explaining in a concise and complete way the dynamics of happiness. A main barrier in the current scientific literature explains why this has not been discovered before: a paradigm that has long dominated psychology concerning happiness. It is the dangerous paradigm attributing 50% to 100% in other studies of happiness to genetics. 50 or 100%? Incoherent conclusions forecasting cracks in the theory of Set Point of Well Being as announced by Headey. Simply the collapse of theories based on extrapolation of data by scientists over enthusiastic about genetics. It is dangerous to mislead people to think they can't change their happiness level because it is mainly due to genetics, risking them to abandon and condemning them to unhappiness by creating limiting beliefs of an incapacity to change. Another article bring the solution to this major problem it is called the "Fundamental Principles of the Dynamics of Emotions" (FPDE, Barnat, 2019a), obviously including happiness. It is the missing piece to achieve to destroy the dangerous paradigm attributing happiness to genetics that we as scientists have all a responsibility to stop propagating as it is wrongly misleading people to think they mainly can't do anything about their happiness and risking a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*Keywords:* happiness, emotions, genetics, stress, self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **A happy personality depends mostly on YOUR THOUGHTS, NOT your genetics**

The current status of the science of happiness is to summarize saying: 50 % depends on genetics and 50% can be acted upon. With what was called a Set Point of Well Being. The aim of this article is to prove that this is not only wrong but dangerous as it mislead people to think they can't change their happiness level because it is mainly due to genetics, risking them to abandon and condemning them to unhappiness by creating limiting beliefs of an incapacity to change. This article with three other articles (Barnat, 2019a, 2019b and 2019c) aim to replace this paradigm by a new one based on the Fundamental Principles of the Dynamics of Emotions (FPDE) as a masterpiece replace this existing dangerous paradigm which has related happiness to genetics without precaution.

The article "The Set-Point Theory of Well-Being Needs Replacing: On the Brink of a Scientific Revolution?" written by Headey, Bruce in 2007 explains well how this theory of Set Point of Well-being and influence of genetics on happiness was formed. One of the main basis is as wrote B. Headey: "In successive papers, using somewhat different approaches, they have claimed that genetic factors account for about 50% of the variance in SWB (Lykken and Tellegen, 1996), or perhaps close to 100% (Lykken, 1999, 2000). This last estimate plainly leads to the conclusion that SWB is more or less fixed for life and that neither individual efforts nor public policy can do much to enhance it."

This article together with the FPDE (Barnat, 2019a) is exactly the Scientific Revolution revolution that Bruce Headey is forecasting. Indeed this article exactly explains how happiness is not due to genetics but mainly the result of a cognitive process, a comparison between perceived reality and desires (see article Barnat, 2019a for explanations).

Like Bruce Headey explains "the central proposition of the current theory the Set Point of Well Being "is that adult individuals have differing but stable levels of SWB; levels substantially due to personality traits and other factors which are partly hereditary or determined early in life. Adult SWB is not supposed to change. Major life events can cause deviations from the set-point but their effects are usually transitory and, after a period of 'deviation', people return to their previous set-points." (Headey, 2007).

And like he wrote "there are discordant evidences" in the theory of the genetic set point. The "first cracks in the theory": "even before set-point theory began to be questioned, there was some discordant evidence. It was clear that some life events are so adverse, so tragic that victims never recover back to their previous set-point. One such event is the unexpected death of a child (Wortman and Silver, 1987). It was easy to dismiss such unusual tragic events as 'rare exceptions' which did not require revision of the theory. More difficult from the point of view of the theory, is Clark and al's (2004) evidence about repeated spells of unemployment. They show that repeated spells - although not a single spell - have a 'scarring effect' from which most people do not fully recover."

The FPDE completely explains those cracks in the theory: the death of a child or repeated spells of unemployment are events where obviously the gap "Perceived Reality < Desire" is big and difficult to accept which causes the lasting unhealthy emotions (unhappiness) which can only be stopped by modification of the cognition: accepting the death of the child or the unemployment and replacing those thoughts by more healthy thoughts.

And this is coherent with the “construal framework foreshadowed in previous theoretical and empirical work” referred to by S. Lyubomirsky (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Like she wrote: “Indeed, most theoretical perspectives on happiness, as well as a number of relevant theoretical models in related areas, attempt to explain how various cognitive and motivational processes account for differences in enduring and transient well-being (DeNeve, 1999).”

It is not because a significant number of twins have been involved in the studies about the influence of genetics on happiness that it means that it makes those theories perfectly reliable. We must never forget that science can be wrong even when it seems extremely reliable. Einstein proved this without a doubt by revolutionizing physics when he showed evidences that a solid theory from Newton which survived more than 200 years was wrong. If the laws of Newton highly more proved than these psychological studies were proven wrong after centuries of triumph this must convince us of something we should already know: scepticism is fundamental in science. Here is why we need to completely bury the set point theory and this idea that happiness is mostly genetic:

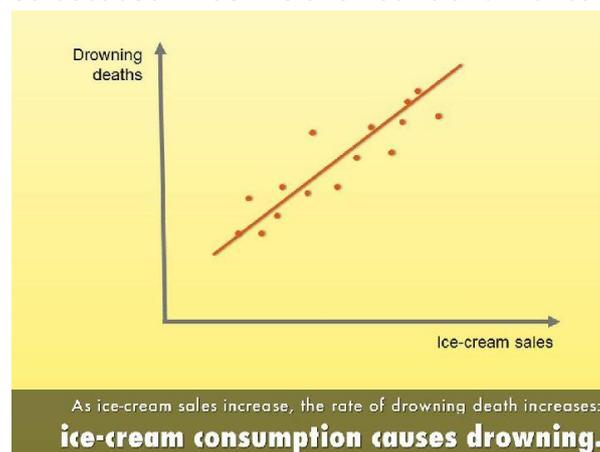
1. The numerous discordant evidences / cracks in the theory described by Bruce Headey that I will not repeat here.
2. Bias in the data or interpretation?  
By proposing a new paradigm to replace the theory of genetic set point of WB I hope to trigger an in depth re-examination of all the studies that have led to this discordant theory.
3. What does mean the same environment or a different environment for these twins?  
This is for example one of the very clear limit of the study from Lykken. It is impossible to guarantee a completely similar environment or a completely different environment. For example I was personally influenced in my personality by Socrates what I studied from him what became one of the founding bricks of my personality. Who tells us that one of the twin who was supposed to be in the same environment than his twin was not the only one influenced by a book, a music, a friend or so many sources of influence that they cannot be listed? That would dismiss the foundation of the study of Lykken: “same environment”. And that twins reared apart did not by chance have the same cultural influences? It is totally possible especially with such small samples. Was that controlled? Of course not as this would mean not only follow the twins in their daily life but also speak with them to understand what has forged their personality. And what this article will explain is how influences clearly shape cognition, personality and the capacity to be happy.
4. Variance in happiness does not equal happiness:  
The figures of Lykken article explain the variance in happiness - or the variation in happiness between different people. That is, genetic factors – or the presence of heritable personal traits – can explain about 50% of the difference in happiness levels between two people. It's a small, but important detail. It means that if one person scores a 7 out of 10, and another person scores an 8, 50% of that 1-point

difference could be due to genetic traits. That is not the same as saying that for a person that scores an 8, half of its level of happiness, or 4 points, are due to genetics.

5. Correlation does not mean causation:

But even in the best case if the data were confirmed to be without bias I can already say that Lykken himself should have been much more sceptic in his own conclusions. In his conclusion he said: “If the transitory variations of well-being are largely due to fortune's favours, whereas the midpoint of these variations is determined by the great genetic lottery that occurs at conception, then we are led to conclude that individual differences in human happiness—how one feels at the moment and also how happy one feels on average over time—are primarily a matter of chance.”. This conclusion is wrong and far too much extrapolating from the data. Correlation does not mean causation this here clearly needs to be reminded.

A famous example which has the benefit to highlight its absurdity is: ice cream sales increases, the rate of drowning deaths increases sharply. Therefore, ice cream consumption causes drowning? Of course not this example fails to recognize the importance of time of year and temperature to ice cream sales. Ice cream is sold during the hot summer months at a much greater rate than during colder times, and it is during these hot summer months that people are more likely to engage in activities involving water, such as swimming. The increased drowning deaths are simply caused by more exposure to water-based activities, not ice cream. The stated conclusion is false because it has mistaken correlation for causation.



**Figure 1:** An illustration of the mistakes that can be done when someone conclude wrongly that a correlation is a causation

Another example less obvious, in a widely studied case, “numerous epidemiological studies showed that women taking combined hormone replacement therapy (HRT) also had a lower-than-average incidence of coronary heart disease (CHD), leading doctors to propose that HRT was protective against CHD. But randomized controlled trials showed that HRT caused a small but statistically significant increase in risk of CHD. Re-analysis of the data from the epidemiological studies showed that women undertaking HRT were more likely to be from higher socio-economic groups (ABC1), with better-than-average diet and exercise regimens. The use of HRT and decreased

incidence of coronary heart disease were coincident effects of a common cause (i.e. the benefits associated with a higher socioeconomic status), rather than a direct cause and effect, as had been supposed” (Lawlor, Smith, Ebrahim, 2004). So again mistaking correlation for causation has led to the wrong conclusion.

Scepticism is one of the most important principles that a scientist should follow. So knowing that correlation does not mean causation Lykken should never have concluded so strongly in favour of his theory. Indeed as shows the example with the hormone replacement therapy it could be completely wrong!

6. The same problem concerns studies attributing personality to genetics. Looking for example at the study Olson, Vernon, Harris, and Jang (2001), first they tell us that “Asking how much a particular individual's attitudes or traits are due to heredity versus the environment is nonsensical, just like asking whether a leaky basement is caused more by the crack in the foundation or the water outside.” Then they wrote “Notwithstanding the intertwining of heredity and environment, it is possible to estimate the extent to which differences between individuals on an attitude or trait can be attributed to genetic versus environmental factors.” This is completely contradictory! If like they said genetics and environment are intertwining then there is no point trying to determine how much genetics influences personality rather than what we can control like our environment or cognition. And what discoveries epigenetics more recent than this outdated article seem to explain is that genetics is not something fixed we can do nothing about, epigenetics is the study of how genes react with the way we live, our environment, things we can control. We will explain in Part 4 how most personalities are formed and show that it has nothing to do with genetics. Genetics have a dramatic influence on personality only for genetic transmitted anomalies like trisomy 21... But affirming that this is true for everyone based on correlations which is not causation is dangerous. Dangerous as it means risking with no solid evidence for whoever believe in these theories to destroy his/her potential of taking responsibility in constructing his/her personality and like explained below for his/her own happiness. “Why care if it is mostly genetics?” is an extremely destructive/unhealthy thought that no scientist should promote.
7. This theory “happiness is a lot due to genetics” is extremely dangerous because one of the most important principle about human beings is that humans for an important part create their own reality based on what they believe they are. This will be explained further in my book but I cannot highlight enough how important it is, all the alarms should be triggered to warn humanity and the scientific community of the danger not to understand this. To be even more clear it means that if you can convince someone that he is stupid or that he cannot do much to be happier and that person believes you and stop trying then you are responsible because you convinced that person of the destruction of his/her potential of intelligence and capacity to be happy. And this is exactly what is done when wrongly attributing personality and happiness potentially more than it should be to genetics. A scientific study has already started to demonstrate an aspect of this with what was called the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal, 1965). In this experiment they lied to a teacher saying that some of his/her students are superior intellectually but they were not and the result was that the students actually got better IQ results! The conclusion is that “The results of the

experiment provided evidence that one person's expectations of another's behaviour may come to serve as a **self-fulfilling prophecy**". The concept of **limiting beliefs** points to the same conclusions. If you add these to the results of the Milgram experiment (1963) showing that when a scientific authority tell something to people they have a tend to believe it without questioning and you get a recipe for disaster potentially convincing humanity that their happiness and personality depends for a big part of genetics something they can't control so have them to give up on it and as a result being less happy, more depressed, less in control of their life. And harm has already been done with media as you can see on newspapers like the New York Times or YouTube videos convincing people that their happiness is partially out of their control because most of people see genetics as something fixed they have no control on.

It is important to remind that even the existing paradigm attributing happiness to genetics do in the most recognized results attribute only 50% to genetics. Meaning that even in this case it still leave people half of the control on their own happiness and even more since that genetics is more and more seen as something that can be altered in reaction of genes with environment with epigenetics. But for the exact percentage of influence of genetics different studies give different results just showing the weakness of those theories.

My personal intuition is that genetics' influence on happiness and personality is globally closer to 0 % than 50% because even someone who inherit genetic diseases can be happy or learn to be happy despite them, even if it is more difficult it is feasible depending on the type of anomaly of body or mind (they are few exceptions that can affect personality like trisomy 21... but they are exceptions not the norm). But the objective truth is that nobody knows exactly what this percentage is. Nobody knows exactly how much genetics causes happiness or personality because correlation is not causation. And by affirming the contrary there is a big danger of reducing the self-confidence of humans in their own capacity to make themselves happy and construct the personality needed for a healthy life and society. **The conclusion that we must all take from all these points is that the only reasonable attitude as Scientifics who can influence the mental health of humanity is the principle of precaution. We must be perfectly honest and highlight that we have no real scientific certainty on how much happiness and personality are influenced by genetics but we know that the capacity of someone to believe he/she can do something is dramatically important to actually be able to do this. As a result the only healthy message that should be communicated by the scientific community and attitude adopted by humanity is to try their best to be as happy as possible and have the best personality possible.** It is the only healthy paradigm as if people try their best to control their happiness and personality at least we can all be sure that humanity is living to the best of its potential and that this potential was not destroyed by unhealthy beliefs that they are powerless. What this article aim to demonstrate with the FDPE (Part 1) is that happiness is actually completely under our responsibility we can learn to be happy even if is hard as it means changing our habits and personality. And Part 5 start to explain how to construct a healthy personality.

## Conclusion

To get the full picture it is important to know that this article is a deeply interconnected part of four articles forming four ground-breaking theories:

1. "The Fundamental Principles of Happiness and Emotions" (Barnat, 2019a). Exposing the discovery of the FPDE explaining the dynamics of emotions. One of the most powerful theory psychology has to offer to explain clearly, coherently and completely some of the most important motivations of humans: happiness, laugh, anger, sadness...
2. "Clarify the confusion around emotions and feelings" (Barnat, 2019b). A correction of the whole scientific paradigm around emotions which went into the wrong direction with some scientists confused between feelings and emotions now listing tens of thousands of emotions.
3. This article aims using the FPDE to put a definitive end to the dangerous paradigm attributing happiness to genetics based on extrapolation of data by scientists over enthusiastic about genetics and thinking it can explain everything. It does not and it is a dangerous message misleading people to have self-limiting beliefs about their capacities to be happy and risk a self-realizing prophecy. Meaning that the scientists made people unhappy by convincing them they can't be otherwise which is deeply unacceptable.
4. "Personalities Unconsciously Improvised Resulting in Emotional Pain" (Barnat, 2019d). A new paradigm to explain with the FPDE how humans construct unconsciously unhealthy personalities resulting in emotional suffering. The missing link between psychoanalysis and the rest of cognitive and behavioural psychology, as psychoanalysis had some powerful insights but did not until now explained completely and clearly the mechanisms of the unconscious, of neurosis and other mental illnesses. And a new type of psychotherapy based on the understanding the dynamics of our emotions with the FPDE concludes that happiness result from Ensuring Healthy Perception and Desires (EHPD).

Those four theories lay down the foundations for the science of happiness giving its basic principles but for which complete detailed explanations will be done in a book as it involves society and is too long to be exposed in an article.

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A happy personality depends mostly on your thoughts, not your genetics

10

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