Pet Peeves and Happiness: How Do Happy People Complain?

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ABSTRACT. The present study was designed to investigate the relationships among mindfulness, happiness, and the expression of pet peeves. Previous research has established a positive correlation between happiness and mindfulness, but, to date, no research has examined how each of these variables is related to complaining in the form of pet peeves. Four hundred ten male and female college students listed the pet peeves they had with a current or former relationship partner. They also completed measures of happiness, positive and negative affect, depression, mindfulness, relationship satisfaction, and satisfaction with life. Pet peeves were negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, well-being, and mindfulness. Consistent with hypotheses, support was found for the mediating role of mindfulness in the relationship between happiness and pet peeves.

IN SPITE OF THE RELATIVELY LIMITED empirical attention devoted to complaining, everyone is familiar with the behavior, albeit to varying degrees. Complaining is “an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both” (Kowalski, 1996, p. 180). Pet peeves represent complaints about very specific events, persons, or behaviors. Cunningham, Barbee, and Druen (1997; see also O’Connor, 2011) discussed pet peeves within the context of Cunninghams’s social allergen model. Using the analogy of the physical allergen process, Cunningham discussed how behaviors that initially produced only mild annoyance, can, over time, become social allergens and produce a much more negative emotional response.

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Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, and Ault (2005) define a social allergen as “a reaction of hypersensitive annoyance or disgust to a repeated behavior” (p. 273). This repeated nature of annoying behaviors may lead to pet peeves and distinguish pet peeves from daily hassles and/or stressors.

Clearly, not everyone complains equally (Kowalski, 1996, 2003). Whereas some people find fault with everything, others rarely express dissatisfaction. Are these individuals who rarely express dissatisfaction truly more satisfied than more chronic complainers or are they less likely to express their dissatisfaction? Researchers agree that individuals differ in their set point for happiness; however, they also concur that approximately 40% of happiness is determined by intentional activities (e.g., practicing optimism; seeking out new activities; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Related to this, researchers have found positive relationships between happiness and mindfulness (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012; Perez-Blasco, Viguier, & Rodrigo, 2013). Specifically, mindfulness is positively correlated with subjective well-being and negatively correlated with distress. Langer (1989, 2009) defined mindfulness in terms of three characteristics: “(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; (3) awareness of more than one perspective” (p. 62). This definition suggests happiness and mindfulness share similar characteristics (e.g., openness to new experiences).

To date, however, research has not examined the interrelationships among happiness, mindfulness, and the expression of pet peeves, the focus of the current exploratory study. Hypotheses include:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1)** Participants higher in mindfulness will report higher happiness and (H2) express fewer pet peeves with a relational partner, because of their awareness of more than one perspective, than individuals lower in mindfulness. In addition, (H3) happier individuals will express more satisfaction with their close relationships and (H4) engage in the intentional activity of expressing fewer pet peeves. Researchers have yet to explore the mechanisms through which happiness might be related to complaining in the form of pet peeves. Given the role of mindfulness in reducing anxiety and distress (Kiken & Shook, 2012), and in allowing people to become aware of another’s perspective and motives, we hypothesize that (H5) being mindful may be the mechanism through which individuals who are happy engage in less frequent expressions of their pet peeves.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Four hundred and ten undergraduates participated in this study (149 males, 260 females, 1 unreported; $M_{age} = 19.23$, $SD = 2.23$; 87.0% Caucasian). Forty-four percent of participants listed pet peeves focusing on a current relationship partner and 56% a former relationship partner.

**Materials and Procedure**

Participants completed a survey in which they listed their pet peeves with a relationship partner (range: 0–15 pet peeves). A definition of pet peeves was provided. Participants then determined their top three pet peeves and answered questions about these three pet peeves, including their
relationship satisfaction and the effect these pet peeves had on their relationship. They completed measures of Positive and Negative Affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988); Satisfaction With Life (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985); Mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003); Depression (Radloff, 1977); and Happiness (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Response formats corresponded to the original scales. The order of individual difference measures and pet peeves measurement was counterbalanced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displays internal descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among study variables.1 Across participants, the top pet peeves were smacking gum, mumbling, not listening, complaining, uncleanliness, and being late. As predicted, mindfulness was positively correlated with happiness ($r_{current} = .45$, $r_{former} = .38$), and moderately negatively correlated with total number of pet peeves ($r_{current} = -.24$, $r_{former} = -.23$; Cohen, 1992), supporting $H1$ and $H2$. However, the predicted positive relationship between happiness and relationship satisfaction was only significant among participants reporting on their current relationship ($r_{current} = .30$, $r_{former} = -.04$), as was the predicted negative relationship between happiness and number of pet peeves ($r_{current} = -.16$, $r_{former} = -.01$). Thus $H3$ and $H4$ were partially supported.

Next, to test $H5$, mindfulness as a mediator of the relation between happiness and number of pet peeves, we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). Analyses yielded a small but significant indirect effect for mindfulness (indirect effect = –.42, 95% CI [–.65, –.22], $\kappa^2 = .09^2$), thus supporting $H5$.

Overall, pet peeves were negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, well-being, and mindfulness, at least for a current relationship. This suggests that pet peeves may be linked to a couple’s happiness in a relationship. Additionally, mindfulness may be a means of attenuating one’s likelihood of expressing pet peeves when one is feeling happy. Perhaps people who are more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Happy</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>SWL</th>
<th>Mind</th>
<th>Dep</th>
<th>SWR</th>
<th>EOR</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>–0.44*</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>–0.64**</td>
<td>–0.04</td>
<td>–0.12</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>–0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>–0.38**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>–0.28**</td>
<td>–0.15</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWL</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>–0.23**</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>–0.53**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>–0.17**</td>
<td>–0.08</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>–0.35**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>–0.34**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>–0.14**</td>
<td>–0.24**</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dep</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>–0.65**</td>
<td>–0.12</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>–0.54**</td>
<td>–0.46**</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>–0.06</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWR</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>–0.13</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>–0.29**</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>–0.43**</td>
<td>–0.13</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.08</td>
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<td>EOR</td>
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<td>1.10</td>
<td>–0.30**</td>
<td>–0.11</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>–0.29**</td>
<td>–0.30**</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>–0.65**</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>–0.16*</td>
<td>–0.13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>–0.19*</td>
<td>–0.25**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>–0.26**</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values below the diagonal are from participants who reported on their current relationship ($n = 175$); values above the diagonal are from participants who reported on a former relationship ($n = 222$). Cronbach’s alpha values are presented along the diagonal in italics for the entire sample; Happy: Oxford Happiness Scale; PA: positive affect; NA: negative affect; SWL: satisfaction with life; Mind: mindfulness; Dep: depression; SWR: satisfaction with the relationship; EOR: effect of pet peeves on relationship; #: number of pet peeves. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.
mindful modulate the type of complaints they offer, preferring to engage in instrumental types of complaints over expressive complaints, thereby expressing complaints only when they believe they will accomplish desired outcomes. Future longitudinal research is needed comparing pet peeves, mindfulness, and happiness over time. Furthermore, the current study assessed pet peeves in the context of relationship partners only. Therefore, additional research should examine other relationships in which pet peeves are likely to be expressed, such as friendships. Furthermore, expressing pet peeves when instructed to do so, as in the current study, may differ from the natural expression of pet peeves in the context of an ongoing relationship. Additional research is also needed comparing the expression of pet peeves in ongoing healthy versus failing relationships. Perhaps the failing nature of a relationship contributes to the creation of hypersensitive feelings of disgust. Finally, the current study assessed general happiness rather than relationship happiness specifically. Future research should examine happiness within the context of the relationship itself.

NOTES

1. Due to differences in hypothesized relationships between participants reporting on their current vs. former relationships, we report the results separately in Table 1 and in the text.
2. The size, direction, significance, and effect size for the mediation analyses did not differ between participants reporting on a current vs. a former relationship partner. Therefore, we present the mediation results for the full sample here for simplicity.

AUTHOR NOTES

Robin M. Kowalski, Brooke Allison, Julia Turner, Elizabeth Whittaker, Laura Frazee, and Justin Stephens are affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Clemson University. Gary W. Giumenti is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Quinnipiac University.

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