

## Happiness: A Critical Literature Review

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### **Abstract**

*The debate about what happiness is has been raging on for more than a century now. Without unanimity of definition though, the importance of happiness has manifested itself in the increase in happiness studies in journals and even in public policies. The study aims to bring a more unified definition by bringing together the main components involved in defining happiness. It also aims to highlight the importance of a working definition in happiness research. An outline of the operational definition helps identify whose happiness is being analysed. Findings from the systematic review of existing literature indicate that the debate still stands. Economists and positive psychologists, however, seem to concur that utility is a defining concept in happiness studies. Lastly, a group of authors seem to relegate to the peripheries the importance of the working definition of happiness in research yet this improves study evaluation. Thus, the misunderstanding of happiness is sometimes exacerbated by lack of the working definitions in some studies. The absence of operational definitions makes the question on whose happiness an important one to answer. The importance of indicating working definitions for controversial terms like happiness is recommended in this study.*

**Keywords:** *Happiness, Subjective well-being, satisfaction with life, quality of life, utility.*

### **1. Introduction**

Recently there has been a surge in happiness studies (Dolan, Peasgood and White, 2008) with current economists joining the discussion a bit later than other social science disciplines. This is despite its economic origin mostly associated with welfare economics views by Bentham (1823), Pigou (1920); who is considered the father of welfare economics, Hicks (1939) and Samuelson (1947). It seems Samuelson is among those economists to fight for the existence of welfare economics from the time of his PhD studies to the publication of his 1947 book: *Foundations of Economic Analysis* and the succeeding studies Samuelson carried out. The book has become so influential in happiness literature hence the popularisation of the Bergson-Samuelson Social Welfare function. However, Arrow (1948) cannot be ruled out with his famous impossibility theorem in which he also stated that hedonic psychology is aligned to utilitarianism. Thus, possibly based on these literature trends, Sen (2008) indicated that happiness has been a central concern in economics housed in the discipline of welfare economics. Despite the long history of welfare economics and hence happiness economics, the definition of happiness remains ambiguous among social scientists, economists included. The ambiguity in defining happiness makes its understanding complex. These complex differences in definitions have also possibly led to even the different measures of happiness with some researchers using single-item