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The Pursuit of Happiness:
An Exploration of Older Adults’ Intentional Happiness-Enhancing Activities
and their Association with Wellbeing and Health

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Annette Marie Henricksen

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ABSTRACT

Research on the wellbeing of older adults is becoming increasingly important in order to inform social policy and planning relating to the growing aging population. Happiness has been identified as an important social policy objective and wellbeing indicator and research indicates that intentional happiness-enhancing activities provide a promising avenue for enhancing wellbeing. However, limited research has been conducted on the intentional activities people choose to engage in to enhance their happiness, particularly in regard to older adults. Another limitation of the intentional activities research to date is the predominant focus on happiness as the criterion variable. Health is another important factor to consider, especially given the physical declines that occur with age. Research support for the influence of intentional activities on happiness, and for the positive influence of happiness on health, indicate promise for improving wellbeing and health outcomes for older adults. However, given the limited research to date, further work is required. A programme comprising four studies was designed to address these research limitations.

Study One explored the intentional happiness-enhancing activities of older adults with a thematic analysis of interviews with 23 adults (aged 56–76 years). The results of this study informed the second study, which involved the development of a measure of older adults’ happiness-enhancing activities and initial empirical testing of this measure using survey responses from a population sample of 2313 older adults (55-73 year olds). The third study used the same data to examine relationships between happiness-enhancing activities, happiness, and health outcomes, and to test a hypothesised intentional activity to happiness to health pathway. The final study extended the previous research by employing a longitudinal investigation with a population sample of 1730 older adults to further clarify the nature of relationships between intentional activities, wellbeing, and health outcomes.

The results of this research indicate that older adults’ intentional activities are positively related to happiness, life satisfaction, and life meaning, and that these are in turn predictive of better physical and mental health. These findings point to potential benefits of promoting older adults’ intentional activities, particularly self-concordant and socially-oriented activities, for enhancing wellbeing and health.
This thesis is based on four research manuscripts. The first manuscript was published in Aging International in 2010. The second manuscript has recently been published in the Journal of Happiness Studies (2012). The third manuscript has been submitted for publication and is currently under review. The final manuscript has not yet been submitted for publication, but will be submitted in the next month.

To maintain a consistent presentation throughout the thesis, the formatting of the submitted studies (e.g., headings, reference citations, table and figure captions) has been modified. However, the content of the papers remains the same (see Appendices A and B for published copies of Studies One and Two, respectively).

The ideas presented in this thesis are my own. My primary supervisor helped me with statistical advice, structuring my arguments, and selecting appropriate journals for publication. For these reasons, Dr Christine Stephens was included as a co-author for the publications included in this thesis.

Annette Henricksen
Doctoral Candidate
Massey University
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