

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

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

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in  
Psychology

at

Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand.

**Annette Marie Henricksen**

**2012**

## **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.

## PREFACE

---

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

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

---

I wish to express my most heartfelt gratitude to those who helped get me through this 'character-building' journey; always there when needed, with endless patience, grace, and support. I feel truly blessed to have them in my life. To the family and friends without whom this journey would have been a very different and no doubt much less enjoyable experience, I am truly grateful. Special thanks go to the three Rebeccas, Hayley, Sarah, Lynn, and Dave, whose love, friendship, advice, faith and encouragement are deeply appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge the great support I have received from the School of Psychology. I am grateful to have been able to complete this journey within such a supportive environment. I must thank my supervisors and colleagues, whose encouragement and assistance throughout this process have been invaluable. In particular I thank Dr Christine Stephens, as my primary supervisor, for her time, feedback, guidance, and encouragement. Special thanks also go to Alan, Andy, Ann, KC, Maria, Michael, and all the other psychology staff and students who have helped in numerous ways along the journey. Their support, understanding, advice, and humour have been very much appreciated.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Aging Population .....	1
Happiness and Wellbeing .....	2
Activity & Wellbeing .....	4
Relationships with Health .....	11
Summary and Research Aims.....	13
Thesis Outline.....	14
<b>Study One: An Exploration of the Happiness-enhancing Activities Engaged in by Older Adults</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Abstract.....	18
Method .....	24
Findings .....	26
Discussion.....	33
References .....	37
<b>Reflections</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>Study Two: The Happiness-enhancing Activities and Positive Practices Inventory (HAPPI): Development and Validation</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Abstract.....	43
Method .....	50
Results.....	56
Discussion.....	60
Appendix: Inventory Items .....	65
References .....	66

<b>Reflections .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Study Three: The Mediating Role of Happiness in the Relationship between Older Adults' Intentional Activities and Health.....</b>	<b>73</b>
Abstract.....	73
Method .....	78
Results.....	81
Discussion.....	86
References .....	91
<b>Reflections .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Study Four: Longitudinal Investigation of the Relationships between Older Adults' Intentional Activities, Wellbeing, and Health.....</b>	<b>100</b>
Abstract.....	100
Method .....	105
Results.....	109
Discussion.....	115
References .....	123
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>129</b>
Research Aims.....	129
Contributions to the Literature .....	131
Limitations and Future Research .....	134
Implications of Present Findings .....	139
Conclusion .....	142
<b>References.....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>157</b>
Appendix A. Study One Publication .....	158
Appendix B. Study Two Publication.....	174
Appendix C. Interview Study Contact Letter .....	192
Appendix D. Interview Guide .....	194
Appendix E. Interview Study Summary Letter.....	195
Appendix F. Pilot Study Information and Inventory Format Options .....	198
Appendix G. Article for the International Council on Active Aging .....	206

## LIST OF FIGURES

---

- Figure 1. Path diagram depicting the full mediating role of happiness in the relationship between intentional activity and mental health..... 85
- Figure 2. Path diagram depicting the mediating role of happiness in the relationship between intentional activity and physical health..... 86
- Figure 3. Path diagram depicting the full mediating role of happiness in the relationship between intentional activity and later mental health..... 114
- Figure 4. Path diagram depicting the partial mediating role of happiness in the relationship between intentional activity and later physical health..... 115



## LIST OF TABLES

---

Table 1.	<i>Activity themes and sub-themes</i> .....	26
Table 2.	<i>Pattern Matrix, Eigenvalues, Variance Explained and Descriptive Statistics for the HAPPI Items</i> .....	57
Table 3.	<i>Pearson’s Correlations between the HAPPI Subscales and Various Measures</i> .....	58
Table 4.	<i>Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Happiness Ratings from the HAPPI Subscales</i> .....	59
Table 5.	<i>Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Regression Variables</i> .....	82
Table 6.	<i>Summary of Regression Analyses Testing the Mediating Effect of Happiness on Relationships between Intentional Activity and Health Variables</i> .....	84
Table 7.	<i>Comparison of Percentages of Those in Groups of Each Nominal Variable for 2008 and 2010 Samples</i> .....	106
Table 8.	<i>Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations between Regression Variables</i> .....	110
Table 9.	<i>Comparison of Standardised Betas for Intentional Activities before and after Predicted Mediators were Entered for Mental and Physical Health Models</i> .....	111