

Do What Makes You Happy: College students often cite happiness as one of the most important aspects of their lives. As a young, first-generation student, I was never an exception to this statistic. However, while most actively seek to obtain happiness, I instead possess a desire to *understand it*. This drive initially led me to the basement of the University of Central Florida library, where I began to deeply immerse myself in emotion theory and research. I sought answers. However, as I became more familiar with basic research on the human emotional experience, I discovered fascinating unanswered questions. This trend led me to consider a career in science. As I thought about this decision, I reflected upon the age-old advice: “Do what makes you *happy*.” Although I still did not quite understand what happiness was, I had a hunch that I would find it within my pursuits to become an emotion researcher.

Although I was studying Psychology at the time, my program was largely applied and uninterested in my basic research questions regarding emotion. Therefore, in order to pursue my interests, I reasoned that it would be useful to forge my own direction into related disciplines. Based on discussions with faculty about useful perspectives, I developed an experimental psychology plan through the Interdisciplinary Studies program, integrating coursework from cognitive science, psychology, and statistics. Although non-traditional, this program provided me with advanced training and an interdisciplinary insight that has been crucial in the development of my approach to studying emotional phenomenon.

Relevant Research Experience: My undergraduate research career largely revolved around research on happiness. I initially focused on the hotly contested question of “what is happiness?” Researchers disagree over this conceptualization, with differing emphasis on emotional, subjective, and eudemonic components. I focused on the leading conceptualization of happiness, Subjective Well Being, which views happiness not only as emotion, but also as a subjective sense of life satisfaction. Given mixed evidence regarding alignment between scientific and lay-beliefs of happiness, and disagreements over the definition of happiness, I believed that it was important to compare the Subjective Well Being construct to lay-beliefs, which are the lens in which non-scientific people understand, judge, and pursue happiness. To test whether lay-beliefs aligned with the Subjective Well Being construct, I had participants rate the happiness of a character whose trait emotionality and life satisfaction were manipulated in fictional vignettes. Although guided by a cognitive and social psychologist, this endeavor was largely independent, as I led the design, data collection, analyses, and writing, leading to a first-authored publication. This work suggested that lay-beliefs of happiness are consistent with the Subjective Well-Being construct, findings that I was later invited by the UCF undergraduate research director to present at a national meeting of various universities’ board of trustees.

For my undergraduate honors thesis, I studied the “paradoxical effects of valuing happiness”, a line of research demonstrating that valuing happiness leads people to experience less positive emotion. Drawing from my previous work, I was interested in determining if valuing happiness also influenced the other component of subjective well-being: evaluations of life satisfaction. To

investigate these evaluative processes, I utilized facial electromyography to measure peoples' emotional states while they a) thought about, and b) made judgments of their life satisfaction.

My mentor did not possess facial electromyography expertise or equipment, requiring me to autonomously master facial electromyography and acquire nearly \$1,000 of funding. To learn facial electromyography methodology, I reached out and trained under two graduate students who utilized this tool in their applied work, and I received funding through several internal undergraduate grants. This thesis was my most ambitious project. However, obtaining training and funding was time-consuming, leading me to experience an important lesson regarding the detriments of under-powered research. Although interesting trends emerged, I did not find evidence that valuing happiness influences how emotionally positive participants are when they reflect on their life, or judge their life satisfaction. However, I still maintain that my thesis was a profound learning experience, and I was later chosen to discuss my experiences as an undergraduate researcher with Florida legislature.

While collecting data for my thesis, I received a paid assistantship at the UCF Medical School. Working with an interdisciplinary team, I collaborated on a qualitative investigation on student identity development. Here, I primarily helped identify themes regarding shifting student identities in medical school. However, beyond my assigned task, I also noted students' references to emotion along the way, finding evidence of pervasive discussions of negative emotions. Maslach's Burnout Inventory, a leading burnout questionnaire, considers emotional exhaustion to be an underlying factor of burnout, which a recent review suggests afflicts nearly 50% of medical students during their training. Based on the work of emotion regulation researchers like James Gross, I hypothesized that certain emotional regulation strategies may serve as a protective barrier against the emergence of burnout symptomology in medical students. After receiving an internal grant that extended my employment, I subsequently applied for funding to investigate this issue. Although this led to my first rejected proposal, my collaborators rallied support for my proposed work, with almost every Florida medical school agreeing to disseminate our online investigation of medical student affectivity, emotional regulation, and burnout. This work is currently ongoing, with data expected in February.

Today and Tomorrow: For my graduate endeavors I sought a research mentor who possessed expertise in emotion. On November 11th, 2014, I received an email from Dr. Jeff Larsen, who requested a brief, 15 minute phone meeting to discuss this endeavor. This 15 minute meeting quickly stretched into a 90 minute conversation as we discussed the holes, implications, and interpretations of our converging research interests. At that time, it became clear to me that I would pursue my Ph.D. studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

I plan to spend my career continuing to explore the issues, debates, and implications of emotion research. Currently, this involves research on how state happiness may sometimes co-occur with sadness, which tests the competing predictions of two theoretical models of core affect. In the

future, I intend to apply these advancements in mixed-emotion research to research on subjective well-being and attitudes towards life. Along the way, I aspire to be a research-productive scientist, an academic, a professor, a mentor, and a defender of broad participation in science.

Intellectual Merit: My undergraduate research and educational career was atypical, but highly rewarding. Although I pursued predominately “basic” questions within a largely applied psychology program, I was still able to make contributions to science through a primary authored publication and numerous conference proceedings. My experiences have prepared me for my proposed work, and my development is catalyzed by my highly compatible mentor who supports my critical nature and challenges my understanding of emotional phenomenon.

Broader Impacts: In my undergraduate career, I served on the Student Undergraduate Research Council, a group created to heighten undergraduate research involvement and quality. Indicative of my commitment towards broad representation in science, I have collaborated with other students to give two invited lectures on implementing these types of programs at other institutions. In addition, I served as a mentor and a teaching assistant for the Summer Research Academy, a program geared towards underrepresented undergraduates interested in exploring careers in science. I have also guest lectured on empirical critical thinking twice at UCF.

I am convinced that academic mentors have an amazing impact on developing researchers, a notion I empirically support in my primary authored in-review publication on mentoring in the context of undergraduate research. In graduate school, I feel empowered to utilize my mentoring experiences to make an extraordinary impact. This starts by: a) continuing to foster a diverse research environment for my research assistants, which currently includes a large amount of minorities, females, and one Navy veteran, b) continuing to work with undergraduate research offices to ensure broader representation of minorities in science, and c) continuing my work with the Summer Research Academy. Beyond this, I am also working to extend research exposure to high school students. I recently helped coordinate lab tours for several groups of high-school AP psychology students, and with the support of the GRFP, I intend to expand upon this type of research exposure by involving small groups of AP psychology high-school students in my research. This endeavor is indicative of my aspiration to not only produce advancements on the scientific front, but also within societal sectors.

Conclusion: In a recent presentation to a group of low-income high school aspiring researchers, I discussed the difference between textbook knowledge and research, comparing the former to a rock that will eventually erode away, and the latter to a seed that grows exponentially. This analogy reflects my own experience. While I thought I entered research to find answers, my own curiosity continuously generates excitement, new questions, and interesting research ideas. With the support of the GRFP, I will be in a great position to pursue these questions, which will not only further our understanding of the human experience, but also potentially lead to heightened levels of societal well-being.