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Ed Diener (1946–2021)

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IN MEMORIAM

Ed Diener (1946–2021)



Although academic articles on wellbeing are now commonplace, this has not always been the case. Ed Diener helped to establish this growing and important topic of research. He passed away at his home in Salt Lake City, Utah, on April 27, 2021. Ed was especially well-known in social and personality psychology. At the time of his death, he had more than 350 publications, and his impressive citation indices attest to his enormous scholarly influence. He was the recipient of APA's Award for Distinguished Scientific Contribution and the William James Fellow Award from the Association for Psychological Science.

Born in Glendale, California, July 25, 1946, Ed was raised on a remote farm. He was often left to entertain himself and, as a child, he used dice to chart probability and a welding torch to create a flame thrower. He was especially curious about the quality of life of the farmworkers, many of whom were migrant workers from Mexico. Ed attempted to make this the topic of his senior thesis at California State University, Fresno, but was dissuaded from pursuing such a

“fuzzy” topic by his academic advisor. Ironically, he wrote a paper on conformity instead.

Ed shelved his interest in happiness and continued to pursue the study of social influence while a graduate student at University of Washington. He focused on deindividuation, the phenomenon of losing one's sense of self while among a group. Ed showed an early passion for research methods. During this period, he experimented with a paradigm called “beat the pacifist,” in which he told participants that they could help train a nonviolent Vietnam War protestor by beating them with a foam bat. Ed tallied the number of strikes when participants were alone and in groups. Acting as the pacifist, he was once struck more than 60 times in a minute. He also conducted studies on the leakage of debriefed information from one research participant to another. The feather in his methodological cap, during this time, was his Halloween study. Using Halloween costumes as a proxy for deindividuation, Ed was able to investigate honesty-behaviors in children who were anonymous or identified. His expertise on the loss of inhibition while in crowd settings ultimately took Ed to South Africa, where he testified in a crowd-violence trial on the behalf of a juvenile who was saved from the death penalty. Ed received his PhD in 1974.

After graduate school, Ed accepted a position at University of Illinois, where he spent the bulk of his career. Ed spent his first sabbatical year in the Virgin Islands, where he spent his days on the beach reading a wide range of philosophy and psychology. During this time, he sent three letters to his graduate student, Randy Larsen. The first letter revealed Ed's desire to delve into political psychology. The second letter dismissed this idea in favor of an interest in evolutionary psychology. The final letter arrived with the cryptic message: “I think I have found a thing I want to do for the rest of my life. I will tell you when I get back.” When Ed returned to Illinois, he declared that he would study happiness.

With capable graduate students, including Randy Larsen and Bob Emmons, the Diener lab was extremely productive in the first 5 years of this endeavor. Ed published the *Psychological Bulletin* article entitled “Subjective Well-Being” in 1984, launching subjective well-being (SWB) research. The following year, Ed and his students published the

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), one of the most widely used measures of well-being and a paper that has been cited more than 30,000 times. From 1984 to 1986, Ed published nine articles in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Ed was aware of the potential skepticism around a science of happiness. He focused much of his early efforts on building a solid scientific foundation. This included attention to measurement (reliability and validity), conceptual issues (the structure of affect), and an emphasis on descriptive science (investigating age, gender, religiosity, socioeconomic status, and the relation of other demographic variables to SWB). Ed was especially fond of using diverse methods, ranging from the experience sampling method, daily diary methods, clinical interviews, informant reports, memory measures, and longitudinal methods, in addition to self-report.

In addition to establishing the scientific study of happiness, Ed also contributed to the person-situation debate. Participants in one early study reported their affect twice a day at random moments (when a beeper went off) over 6 weeks! The single-occasion, cross-situational consistency of positive affect between social and alone situations was .10, replicating the earlier findings by Walter Mischel. In contrast, the aggregated cross-situational consistency of positive affect between social and alone situations was .58 (uncorrected) and .72 (corrected for measurement errors), replicating the earlier findings by Seymour Epstein. In a typical “Ed fashion” (i.e., nonconfrontational), he concluded that “person consistency varies greatly, depending on the response domain, the situations being considered, and the particular persons involved. Given this complexity, it seems advisable to quit debating whether person consistency exists, and to begin exploring the factors that control consistency.” The field listened.

Once the science of happiness was firmly established, Ed started asking broader questions. The first question was concerned with generalizability: “Who is happy in the world?” With his daughter, Marissa, and wife, Carol, Ed explored this question using national probability samples from 55 countries and found that the wealth of the nation (e.g., gross domestic product [GDP] per capita) and individualism were two major predictors of country-level happiness. In another ground-breaking cross-cultural study, Ed and Marissa showed that self-esteem was more strongly associated with life satisfaction in individualistic countries than in collectivist countries. These two papers, both published in 1995, paved a way for culture and well-being research for the following two decades. In the late 1990s, Ed had a poster on his office door that said “The globe is our laboratory!” and he encouraged his students to go out and collect data in the real world. He was fully aware of the potential bias in relying on American college student

samples and advocated for non-WEIRD samples long before the term WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) became catchy. Examples of such publications include an investigation of the SWB of homeless people and Maasai tribal people.

Ed was particularly enchanted with the question, “What does happiness lead to?” (as opposed to “What leads to happiness?”). He and his colleagues reviewed evidence that happiness is widely beneficial in that frequent positive affect is predictive—often causally so—of better health and relationship and work outcomes. He replicated and extended these findings over the next 15 years. This line of research was particularly important to Ed because it helped justify happiness as societally important.

Another “big question” that Ed and his students tackled was that of hedonic adaptation. Earlier research in this area emphasized complete hedonic adaptation to diverse events. However, most studies relied on cross-sectional comparisons. Ed used a longitudinal design and found that recent life events (within the past 3 months) predicted life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, above and beyond extraversion and neuroticism, whereas older events did not. Later, Ed and his collaborators analyzed nationally representative longitudinal data and tested the effect of major life events such as divorce, widowhood, unemployment, and disability, and found that hedonic adaptation to major negative events is often incomplete and that there are large individual differences in adaptation.

The research on adapting to life circumstances has drawn substantial attention from economists and led to a major coauthored book, published in 2009, entitled *Well-Being for Public Policy*. Well-being policy was a later interest of Ed’s. As the science of happiness became mainstream in the early 2000s, Ed began advocating the establishment of national accounts of well-being to supplement more established economic accounts such as GDP. He believed that a society in which its residents are satisfied is a good society. Ed presented on well-being policy to the United Nation’s General Assembly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the New Zealand Parliament, among others to help implement happiness as a national policy.

Ed will be remembered as a pioneering researcher who tackled big questions with curiosity, openness, and methodological sophistication. His impact on psychology lives on in the journals he helped found, the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, as well as with his many collaborators, graduate students, and postdocs.

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