

# Happiness Comes to People Who Give, Study Finds

By Sam Kean

It turns out you can buy happiness, as long as you don't try to buy it for yourself.

Psychology scholars conducted an array of experiments that found people are happier when they spend money on others, such as giving to charity, than when they spend money on themselves.

In research findings published in the journal *Science* last month, Elizabeth W. Dunn, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, explained how she and several colleagues examined three situations.

In the first, they polled 632 people and asked them to break down how much of their normal income they spent on specific items. In the second, she looked at people who received bonuses or windfalls and again asked them what they spent the money on.

In both cases, people who spent a higher percentage on "prosocial activities," like giving money to nonprofit groups, were significantly happier with their decisions than people who only paid bills or splurged on themselves. In fact, in the second case, the paper says, "the manner in which they spent the money was a more important predictor of their happiness than the size of the bonus itself."

## Lesson for Donors

In an interview, Ms. Dunn also noted that most people had predicted, incorrectly, that spending money on themselves would increase their happiness. And there's a lesson in there for charities.

"It's worth perhaps letting potential donors know about these

results," she says, because many charity officials "assume that most people recognize the potential emotional benefits of giving. But that does not seem to be the case."

In the third part of the paper, Ms. Dunn ran an experiment instructing 46 people to spend a gift of either \$5 or \$20 on themselves or on another person. Later that day, she asked them how happy their spending made them. Again, the people who spent money on others reported greater happiness.

The findings were especially important because of the small amounts of money involved. Most people in the study still tended to spend more money on themselves than on others. But even diverting a small amount of income to charity seems to lead to real gains in happiness.

Over all, though, Ms. Dunn does not want to focus too narrowly on links between happiness and money. People will be happy in ways that have nothing to do with money, as long as they help other people, she says.

"Behaving in a prosocial manner broadly speaking—whether it's holding open the door for someone with groceries or making a donation to a charity or volunteering for an afternoon at a school—all of those things are likely to benefit well-being," she says.

In fact, her research group is following up on the spending study with a study on the emotional benefits of volunteering, and they expect similar results to hold true.

The article appeared in the March 21 issue of *Science* magazine.

4-3-08  
CJP