

Emotion

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Maya Tamir and Brett Q. Ford

Online First Publication, February 6, 2012. doi: 10.1037/a0027223

CITATION

Tamir, M., & Ford, B. Q. (2012, February 6). Should People Pursue Feelings That Feel Good or Feelings That Do Good? Emotional Preferences and Well-Being. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0027223

Should People Pursue Feelings That Feel Good or Feelings That Do Good? Emotional Preferences and Well-Being

Maya Tamir
The Hebrew University

Brett Q. Ford
The University of Denver

Is it adaptive to seek pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant emotions all the time or seek pleasant and unpleasant emotions at the right time? Participants reported on their preferences for anger and happiness in general and in contexts in which they might be useful or not (i.e., confrontations and collaborations, respectively). People who generally wanted to feel more happiness and less anger experienced greater well-being. However, when emotional preferences were examined in context, people who wanted to feel more anger or more happiness when they were useful, and people who wanted to feel less of those emotions when they were not useful, experienced greater well-being. Such patterns could not be explained by differences in the perceived usefulness of emotions, intelligence, perceived regulatory skills, emotional acceptance, social desirability, or general emotional preferences. These findings demonstrate that people who want to feel unpleasant emotions when they are useful may be happier overall.

Keywords: well-being, emotion, emotion regulation, happiness, anger

“Living well is not just maximizing the good feelings and minimizing the bad (. . .). A happy life is not necessarily filled with happy moments.” Robert C. Solomon, p. 86, 2007.

Optimizing well-being involves, at least in part, the optimization of emotional experiences. But what does that entail? Well-being is often equated with the experience of pleasure and the absence of pain over time (e.g., Kahneman, 1999). Indeed, the very term “happiness” is used to refer to emotional well-being (i.e., overall happiness) and to one of the most pleasant emotional states (i.e., happiness). Because emotions are states of pleasure or pain (e.g., Izard, 1977), the experience of pleasant emotions and the absence of unpleasant emotions are core components of well-being (e.g., Diener, 1984). If pleasure and displeasure contribute to well-being, people who are motivated to increase pleasant emotions (e.g., happiness) and decrease unpleasant emotions (e.g., anger) should have higher well-being.

Well-being, however, is not based solely on pleasure. It involves, among other things, a sense of self-fulfillment, purpose in life, mastery, and connection to others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1998). The achievement of well-being is predicated on people’s ability to effectively pursue their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Here, again, emotions play a role, because regardless of how good or bad they feel, emotions can be useful or harmful for goal pursuit (e.g., Frijda, 1986).

Both pleasant and unpleasant emotions can be useful. For example, happiness is a pleasant emotion that can predispose people to cooperate with others, and thus achieve collaboration goals (e.g., Van Dijk, Van Kleef, Steinel, & van Beest, 2008). On the other hand, anger is an unpleasant emotion that can predispose people to compete or fight with others, and thus, achieve confrontation goals (e.g., Van Dijk et al., 2008). If successful goal pursuit contributes to well-being, people who are motivated to increase useful emotions (e.g., anger when pursuing a confrontation goal), and those who are motivated to decrease emotions that are not useful (e.g., happiness when pursuing a confrontation goal) should have higher well-being.

The current investigation examined links between emotional preferences and indices of well-being and adaptive functioning. In what follows, we first distinguish between general emotional preferences (i.e., the extent to which people want to experience an emotion, in general) and contextual emotional preferences (i.e., the extent to which people want to experience an emotion in a particular context). We then discuss the potential links between such preferences and well-being. Finally, we describe the current investigation. We propose that although avoiding unpleasant emotions in general and pursuing pleasant emotions in general may be adaptive, there may be important benefits to pursuing emotions that are likely to be useful in the moment, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant to experience.

General and Contextual Emotional Preferences

Research on emotional preferences (i.e., what emotional states people want to experience) can be roughly divided into two areas. One area concerns variation in how people want to feel in general. Researchers in this area assess the extent to which people generally want to experience certain emotions or affective states. Such research has demonstrated that people generally want to experience pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant ones (e.g., August-

Maya Tamir, Department of Psychology, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel; Brett Q. Ford, Department of Psychology, The University of Denver.

This work was supported by a National Science Foundation grant (SES 0920918) to Maya Tamir.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maya Tamir, Department of Psychology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel. E-mail: tamirm@mscc.huji.ac.il

tine, Hemenover, Larsen, & Shulman, 2010; Kampfe & Mitte, 2009; Rusting & Larsen, 1995).

General emotional preferences are independent of context and somewhat stable over time (Augustine et al., 2010). There is, however, substantial variability in these preferences. For instance, what people generally want to feel is related to their affective dispositions. For example, people who tend to feel more pleasant emotions (e.g., those higher in extraversion) show stronger preferences for pleasant emotions (e.g., Augustine et al., 2010; Kampfe & Mitte, 2009; Rusting & Larsen, 1995). The patterns are less consistent with respect to people who tend to feel more unpleasant emotions (e.g., those higher in neuroticism), although there is some indication that such people show stronger preferences for unpleasant emotions (Ford & Tamir, 2011; Kampfe & Mitte, 2009). General emotional preferences have also been linked to other individual differences, such as cultural differences (e.g., Tsai, Knutson, & Fung, 2006) and self-esteem (e.g., Wood, Heimpel, Manwell, & Whitting, 2009).

A different area of research on emotional preferences focuses on what people want to feel in particular contexts. According to instrumental approaches to emotion regulation (e.g., Bonanno, 2001; Parrott, 1993; Tamir, 2009), people want to feel emotions that can be useful to them, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant to experience. Because the usefulness of emotions depends on the contexts in which they are experienced, what people want to feel is assumed to vary from one context to the next.

Research on contextual emotional preferences has demonstrated that what people want to feel in a given context depends on the goals they pursue. For instance, people show stronger preferences for happiness when they are motivated to collaborate with another, but stronger preferences for anger when they are motivated to confront another (Tamir & Ford, in press; Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). Regulating their emotions according to such preferences, in turn, improved performance, both in computer games (Tamir et al., 2008) and in face-to-face negotiations (Tamir & Ford, in press). Contextual emotional preferences depend on the goals people pursue in the given context, but they also depend on what people know or believe about the usefulness of emotions. The more people expect an emotion to be useful in a given context, the more they want to experience that emotion (Tamir, Chiu, & Gross, 2007; Tamir & Ford, in press; Tamir & Ford, 2009).

Research on general and contextual emotional preferences has proceeded relatively independently and has been rarely integrated (for an exception, see Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Yeung, 2007). In the current investigation, we examine both general and contextual emotional preferences and their potential links to well-being and adaptive functioning.

Are Emotional Preferences Linked to Well-Being?

The potential links between well-being and general emotional preferences are relatively intuitive. Well-being is related to the experience of more pleasant and less unpleasant emotions over time. It stands to reason, therefore, that people who want to feel more pleasant and less unpleasant emotions in general, would have relatively higher well-being. Surprisingly, the evidence for this hypothesis is relatively limited. In one study, people who wanted to feel more high arousal pleasant emotions tended to report higher satisfaction with life, but no links were found with preferences for

unpleasant emotions (Rusting & Larsen, 1995). In another study, people who wanted to feel less unpleasant emotions reported higher satisfaction with life, but no clear links were found with preferences for pleasant emotions (Kampfe & Miller, 2009). From an empirical standpoint, therefore, whether well-being is linked to stronger general preferences for pleasant emotions and to weaker general preferences for unpleasant emotions remains an open question.

The potential links between well-being and contextual emotional preferences may be somewhat less intuitive, particularly in cases in which a useful emotion is unpleasant to experience. On the one hand, preferences for useful but unpleasant emotions may impair well-being to the extent that they are associated with more unpleasant emotional experiences. On the other hand, such preferences may promote well-being to the extent that they are associated with more successful goal pursuit (Tamir & Ford, in press; Tamir et al., 2008). To date, no research has examined the links between preferences for useful emotions and well-being. Exploring such links, therefore, was the main goal of this investigation.

The Current Investigation

We tested whether people who pursue emotions that are likely to be useful experience greater well-being. To do so, we assessed individual differences in preferences for anger and happiness, in particular, because these are unpleasant and pleasant emotions, respectively, that have been shown to be useful (or not) for the achievement of different goals (i.e., confrontation and collaboration, respectively; e.g., Van Dijk et al., 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence showing that people can be motivated to experience these particular emotions when pursuing the goal for which they are useful (Tamir & Ford, in press; Tamir et al., 2008).

Therefore, we assessed individual differences in self-reported preferences for anger and happiness in contexts that give rise to confrontation and collaboration goals. We also assessed preferences for anger and happiness in general. Given that emotional preferences have been linked to affective dispositions, we assessed and controlled for trait anger and trait happiness (i.e., extraversion; Costa & McCrae, 1980; Watson & Clark, 1997). To test whether contextual preferences for emotions were related to how useful people expected these emotions to be, we examined perceptions of the usefulness of emotions. Although we expected preferences for emotions in particular contexts to be associated with the perceived usefulness of emotions in these contexts, we expected the motivation to experience useful emotions, rather than simply perceptions of their usefulness, to be associated with higher well-being. This is because unlike perceptions of usefulness, the motivation to experience an emotion reflects an intention to regulate emotions in a particular direction and could potentially shape the process of emotion regulation.

To test the validity of our self-report measures of contextual emotional preferences, we assessed what people wanted to feel when pursuing different goals, using a behavioral paradigm in the laboratory. We expected that self-reported preferences for emotions in particular motivational contexts would predict preferences for emotion-inducing activities in the laboratory when goals were manipulated. Finally, we tested whether individual differences in general and contextual emotional preferences were associated with

indices of well-being and adaptive functioning measured in a separate session.

Given the correlational nature of our design, associations between individual differences in emotional preferences and well-being, if they exist, could potentially be explained by other variables. For instance, people who are more intelligent may show stronger preferences for useful emotions and higher well-being. Similarly, this may be true for people who are higher in emotional acceptance, higher in self-efficacy in general, or higher in self-efficacy in emotion regulation in particular. To test for links with possible explanatory variables, we assessed academic achievement, general self-efficacy, emotion regulation self-efficacy, impulse control, emotional acceptance, and social desirability. We expected to find positive associations between contextual emotional preferences and indices of well-being and that such associations would not be explained by general emotional preferences or by the explanatory variables mentioned above.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 175$, 54% males, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.21$ years) completed the study for course credit or \$100.¹ Two participants were omitted due to extreme responses (>2.5 SD from mean).²

Procedure

Data were collected in four separate sessions (completed by 96% of participants), to minimize carryover effects and risks of demand characteristics. First, we examined behavioral correlates of contextual emotional preferences in the laboratory in two sessions, administered one week apart. In these sessions, participants did not know their emotional preferences were being assessed. In a third session, administered online approximately three days after the second session, participants completed measures of trait emotions, general preferences for anger and happiness, measures of well-being and adaptive functioning, general self-efficacy, and emotional acceptance. In a fourth session, administered online approximately four days after the third session, participants completed measures of contextual emotional preferences, social desirability, emotion regulation self-efficacy, and a measure of the perceived usefulness of emotions.

Materials

General emotional preferences. Participants rated the extent to which they generally wanted to feel different emotions on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*) (e.g., “To what extent do you want to feel happy, in general?”). General preferences for anger were computed by averaging across ratings of *angry* and *irritated* ($\alpha = .82$), and general preferences for happiness were computed by averaging across ratings of *happy* and *cheerful* ($\alpha = .77$).

Contextual emotional preferences. Participants rated how much they preferred to feel anger or happiness in different situations with responses ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*). The survey included two collaborative situations (i.e., “reaching a compromise” or “collaborating with another”) and two confronta-

tional situations (i.e., “confronting a partner you suspect of cheating” or “arguing with someone who wronged you”).

Situations were selected based on a pilot study ($N = 15$) in which participants rated their motivation to collaborate or confront in each of 20 scenarios (0 = *not at all*; 8 = *extremely*) that varied in content and level of specificity, and were presented in a random order. We selected two situations that were rated the highest in the target goal (i.e., confrontation or collaboration) and the lowest in the competing goal (i.e., collaboration and confrontation, respectively). Participants were more motivated to confront than collaborate when considering the selected confrontational scenarios ($M_s = 7.50, 3.46$, respectively), $t(14)s > 4.12$, $ps < .05$, and more motivated to collaborate than confront when considering the selected collaborative scenarios ($M_s = 7.53, 3.23$, respectively), $t(14)s > 2.40$, $ps < .05$.

The final survey included items for anger and happiness, in collaboration and confrontation, with two situations representing each goal. This resulted in eight items (e.g., “When arguing with someone who wronged you, to what extent do you want to feel angry?”, “When collaborating with another, to what extent do you want to feel happy?”), that were presented in a predetermined random order. We computed contextual preference scores for anger and happiness in confrontation and collaboration, by averaging ratings across goal-consistent situations, separately for each emotion (i.e., anger in the two confrontational situations, anger in the two collaborative situations, happiness in the two collaborative situations, happiness in the two confrontational situations; $\alpha_s = 0.68-0.75$).

Perceptions of the usefulness of emotions. Participants rated the extent to which they believe it would be useful for them to feel anger or happiness in each of the situations included in the contextual emotional preferences survey (e.g., “To what extent might it be useful for you to feel angry when arguing with someone who wronged you?”). To create scores of perceived usefulness of anger and happiness in confrontation and collaboration, we averaged across ratings in goal-consistent situations, separately for each emotion ($\alpha_s = 0.72-0.88$).

Behavioral indices of emotional preferences. We assessed behavioral indices of emotional preferences in two laboratory sessions, one testing emotional preferences in a confrontational context and one in a collaborative context. In each session, motivational contexts were manipulated by giving participants role-playing tasks that required either confrontation or collaboration. After manipulating the motivational context, we assessed emotional preferences by asking people to rate the extent to which they wanted to engage in various emotion-inducing activities before completing the task. In each session, participants were told that they will be completing two role-playing tasks and that before each task, they would listen to music or recall past events and they could indicate their preferences for these activities (see Tamir & Ford, in press). To increase the reliability of our findings, each session included two confrontational or two collaborative tasks (e.g., you

¹ This study was part of a larger research project. Other data from partially overlapping samples have been reported elsewhere (e.g., Ford & Tamir, 2011).

² The main results remained unchanged when the outliers were included in the analyses.

are a police officer investigating a suspect, you are a politician lobbying for a new bill, respectively).³ The orders of the sessions and the tasks were counterbalanced.

After participants were presented with their first role-playing task, they rated the extent to which they wanted to listen to certain types of music or recall certain types of events (0 = *Not at all*; 6 = *Extremely*) before completing the role-playing task. First, participants listened to two 30-s music clips that induce anger (e.g., *Refuse Resist* by Apocalyptica), happiness (e.g., *Estudiante* by Waldteufel), and a neutral state (e.g., *Indecision* by Yo Yo Ma) and rated the degree to which they wanted to listen to the full clip before completing the role-playing task. Clips were pilot tested for their emotional effects (see Tamir & Ford, in press). Participants then rated the extent to which they wanted to recall certain types of past events before completing the task (e.g., to what extent would you like to recall a happy event from your past related to school?). Recall events varied by emotion (angry, happy, not emotional) and by content (related to school, involving a stranger).

After rating their preferences, participants were presented with another task of the same motivational tone and rated a different set of events and music clips. To support the cover story, participants listened to their top selected clip and performed a brief role playing task. Approximately a week later, participants returned to the laboratory to complete the second session. The second session was identical to the first, but included two tasks that differed in motivational tone from the ones the participant completed in the first session.

To index preferences for music clips and memories that induce anger and happiness in confrontation and collaboration, we created eight preference scores by averaging across preferences for music or memories of the same emotional tone in the two confrontational or the two collaborative tasks (mean $\alpha = .69$).⁴

Affective dispositions. The Trait Anger Scale (Spielberger, Jacobs, Russel, & Crane, 1983) indexed trait anger (e.g., “I have a fiery temper”; $\alpha = .85$) and the extraversion subscale in the Big 5 personality inventory (Goldberg, 1999) indexed trait happiness (e.g., “I am the life of the party”; $\alpha = .86$).

Well-being and adaptive functioning. We included two indices of well-being. The Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) assessed psychological well-being (“When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out”; $\alpha = .86$) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) assessed life satisfaction (“In most ways my life is close to my ideal”; $\alpha = .87$). We included three indices of adaptive functioning. The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985) indexed social functioning (e.g., “If I was stranded 10 miles from home, there is someone I could call who could come and get me”; $\alpha = .87$). Participants’ college GPA indexed academic functioning. Finally, participants rated their overall health in the past six months (1 = *Poor*; 4 = *Excellent*).

Possible explanatory variables. The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) indexed general self-efficacy (e.g., “I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events”; $\alpha = .84$). The Emotion Regulation Self-Efficacy Scale (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007) indexed self-efficacy in emotion regulation, in particular (e.g., “If you really want to, how confident are you that you can decrease your anxiety during an important examination”; $\alpha = .84$). To assess

perceived impulse control, participants rated 12 items that describe their ability to control various impulses (e.g., “I can stop myself from snacking even when I’m really hungry”; $\alpha = .80$). The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (Bond et al., 2011) indexed emotional acceptance (e.g., “It’s OK if I remember something unpleasant”; $\alpha = .75$). Finally, the short form of the Marlowe-Crown Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) indexed social desirability (e.g., “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable”; $\alpha = .53$).

Results

Individual Differences in Emotional Preferences

What do people want to feel in general and in particular contexts? Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of preferences for anger and happiness in general, in confrontation and in collaboration. In terms of general preferences, people had a strong preference for happiness and a weak preference for anger, $t(172) = 41.63$, $p < .001$. As expected, however, when examined within context, preferences for anger were significantly higher in confrontation than in collaboration and preferences for happiness were significantly higher in collaboration than in confrontation. This was indicated by a significant Emotion \times Context interaction, $F(1, 167) = 814.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .83$, and $t(170)s > 19.79$, $ps < .001$. There was also a significant Emotion \times Context \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 167) = 7.72$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$, such that females did not differ from males in preferences for anger in confrontation and happiness in collaboration, but they tended to report stronger preferences than males for anger in collaboration ($M_s = .94$ and $.54$, respectively) and for happiness in confrontation ($M_s = 1.21$ and $.79$, respectively).

Are emotional preferences linked to affective dispositions? As shown in Table 1, trait anger was associated with stronger preferences for anger in general, in confrontation and in collaboration. Thus, people who tended to feel angrier preferred to feel more anger both across and within contexts. Extraversion was associated with stronger preferences for happiness in general and in collaboration, but not in confrontation. Thus, people who tended to feel happier generally preferred to feel more happiness, but not in every context. Links between emotional preferences and affective dispositions were not qualified by gender. Because life satisfaction and psychological well-being were significantly linked to

³ The tasks that were used were selected based on a separate pilot study ($N = 15$) in which participants read a list of 14 scenarios. With respect to each scenario participants rated the extent to which they would be likely to behave in a collaborative manner and in a confrontational manner. In addition, they rated each scenario on familiarity, realism, and difficulty. All ratings were made on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). The selected confrontational scenarios were significantly higher in confrontation than the collaborative scenarios, $t(14) = 7.30$, $p < .001$, $M_s = 3.36$ and 1.97 , respectively). The selected collaborative scenarios were significantly higher in collaboration than the confrontational scenarios, $t(14) = 8.13$, $p < .001$, $M_s = 3.37$ and 1.57 , respectively). The scenarios did not differ in familiarity, realism, or importance, $t(14)s < 1.33$ ($M_s = 2.82$, 3.47 , and 2.28 , respectively).

⁴ We tested and did not find evidence for order effects.

Table 1

Simple Correlations Between Preferences for Anger and Happiness in General, in Confrontation, and in Collaboration, and Trait Anger and Extraversion

	Emotional preferences						Mean (SD) [Range]
	General		Confrontation		Collaboration		
	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	
Emotional preferences							
Anger in general							0.40 (0.71) [0–4]
Happiness in general	-.33*						4.94 (1.04) [1–6]
Anger in confrontation	.07	.07					3.73 (1.28) [0–6]
Happiness in confrontation	.33*	-.14	-.11				0.99 (1.13) [0–6]
Anger in collaboration	.30*	-.27*	-.02	.45*			0.75 (0.94) [0–4]
Happiness in collaboration	-.16*	.46*	.16*	-.10	-.23*		4.10 (1.13) [1–6]
Traits							
Trait Anger	.30*	-.19*	.19*	.24*	.29*	-.03	1.85 (0.53) [1–4]
Extraversion	-.06	.15*	.09	.01	-.13	.18*	3.39 (0.61) [1–5]

* $p < .05$.

trait anger ($r_s = -.23$ and $-.29$, $p_s < .001$) and to extraversion ($r_s = .48$ for both, $p_s < .001$), we controlled for these variables in subsequent analyses. This ensured that any associations between emotional preferences and well-being were not driven by typical emotional experiences.

Do people want to feel emotions that they perceive to be more useful in a given context? Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the perceived usefulness of anger and happiness in confrontation and collaboration. On average, participants indicated that anger was more useful in confrontation than in collaboration and that happiness was more useful in collaboration than in confrontation, as indicated by a significant Emotion x Context interaction, $F(1, 167) = 427.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$, and $t(170)s > 15.68$, $p_s < .001$. As expected, participants preferred to experience emotions that they perceived as more useful in a given context (see Table 2). There was also a significant Emotion x Context x Gender interaction, $F(1, 167) = 4.945$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$, such that males perceived happiness as somewhat more useful in confrontation than females ($M_s = 4.19$ and 3.74 , respectively). Overall, the magnitude of the associations between contextual emotional preferences and the perceived usefulness of emotions is consistent with the idea that contextual emotional preferences are guided by instrumental considerations.

Emotional Preferences and Behavior in the Laboratory

As shown in Figure 1, when preferences for emotion-inducing activities were examined in a laboratory context, we found that preferences for anger-inducing activities were higher when participants expected to engage in confrontation than in collaboration, whereas preferences for happiness-inducing activities were higher when participants expected to engage in collaboration than in confrontation, as indicated by a significant Emotion x Context interaction, $F(2, 167) = 72.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$. These effects were not qualified by type of activity rated, $F < 2$ or by session order, $F < 1.5$. The effect was also not qualified by gender, when gender was included in the analysis, $F < 2.3$.

As expected, self-reported emotional preferences were associated with preferences for emotion-inducing activities as participants were preparing for confrontational or collaborative tasks in the laboratory (see Table 3). General preferences for anger were positively associated with preferences for anger in both the collaboration and confrontation tasks. General preferences for happiness were positively associated with preferences for happiness in both the collaboration and confrontation tasks. In contrast, the contextual preferences predicted preferences in the respective mo-

Table 2

Simple Correlations Between Preferences for Emotions in Particular Contexts and the Perceived Usefulness of Emotions in These Contexts

Perceived usefulness	Emotional preferences						Mean (SD)
	General		Confrontation		Collaboration		
	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	
Anger in confrontation	.05	.02	.73*	-.09	.08	.01	3.60 (1.36)
Happiness in confrontation	.25*	-.14*	-.14	.76*	.44*	-.15*	1.13 (1.24)
Anger in collaboration	.30*	-.30*	.11	.58*	.54*	-.30*	1.24 (1.31)
Happiness in collaboration	-.16*	.32*	.15*	-.08	-.20*	.61*	3.98 (1.15)

* $p < .05$.

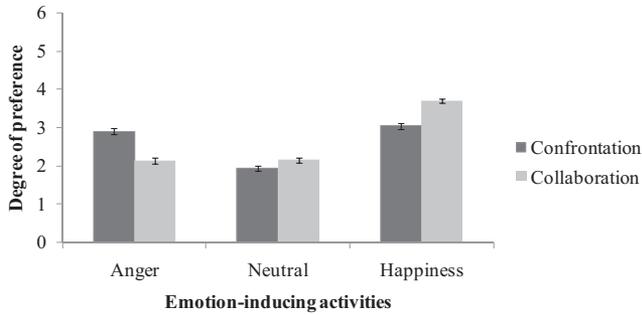


Figure 1. Preferences for anger- and happiness-inducing activities when preparing for confrontational and collaborative tasks.

tivational context, in particular. For instance, participants with higher self-reported preferences for anger in confrontation selected more anger-, but not neutral or happiness-inducing activities when preparing for a confrontational task in the laboratory, but not a collaborative one. A similar pattern of specificity was obtained across the contextual emotional preferences. Although the size of the associations was generally small, these results support the predictive validity of our measures of emotional preferences.

Individual Differences in Emotional Preferences, Well-Being, and Adaptive Functioning

Are general emotional preferences linked to well-being and adaptive functioning? As shown in Table 4, people with relatively stronger preferences for anger in general had lower well-being. On the other hand, people with relatively stronger preferences for happiness in general had higher well-being and adaptive functioning. These patterns remained unchanged when controlling for gender.

Are contextual emotional preferences linked to well-being and adaptive functioning? As we expected, higher preferences for useful emotions (i.e., anger in confrontation and happiness in collaboration) were positively associated with indices of well-being, whereas preferences for emotions that are not useful (i.e., happiness in confrontation and anger in collaboration) were negatively associated with indices of well-being. Participants who reported stronger preferences for anger in confrontation and those who reported stronger preferences for happiness in collaboration reported higher psychological well-being and greater satisfaction with life. In contrast, those who reported stronger preferences for happiness in confrontation and those who reported stronger preferences for anger in collaboration reported lower psychological well-being. Further demonstrating the link between preferences for useful, albeit unpleasant emotions, and adaptive functioning, participants with stronger preferences for anger in confrontations also reported greater social support, better academic functioning, and better health. These patterns remained unchanged when controlling for gender.

Could general emotional preferences account for the associations between well-being and contextual emotional preferences? The associations between contextual emotional preferences and indices of well-being and adaptive functioning remained significant when controlling for general emotional preferences.

This indicates that the links between contextual emotional preferences and well-being cannot be explained by differences in general emotional preferences.

Do people who prefer useful emotions simply perceive them to be more useful? We predicted that it is the motivation to experience emotions when they are useful, rather than the mere perceptions of the usefulness of emotions, that is associated with higher well-being and adaptive functioning. To test this, we first examined the links between perceptions of the usefulness of emotions and indices of well-being and adaptive functioning, controlling for trait affect.⁵ Perceptions of the usefulness of anger in confrontation and in collaboration was not significantly related to indices of well-being or adaptive functioning ($r_s < .14$). Therefore, as hypothesized, people who prefer anger in confrontations did not fare better simply because they knew more about the usefulness of emotions.

Perceptions of the usefulness of happiness were associated with some, but not all, indices of well-being. Specifically, perceptions of the usefulness of happiness in collaboration were correlated with psychological well-being and life satisfaction ($r_s = .17$ and $.16$, $p_s < .05$, respectively) and perceptions of the usefulness of happiness in confrontation were correlated with psychological well-being ($r = -.18$, $p = .024$). These associations were no longer significant when partialing out the corresponding emotional preferences. Similarly, associations between preferences for happiness and psychological well-being and life satisfaction were no longer significant when partialing out corresponding perceptions of the usefulness of happiness. Thus, whereas perceptions of the usefulness of emotions does not account for the link between preferences for anger and well-being, it may contribute to links between preferences for happiness and well-being.

Are people who prefer useful emotions more intelligent, more compliant, have higher self-efficacy, or are more accepting of their emotions? We examined associations between contextual emotional preferences, well-being, and adaptive functioning, controlling separately for college GPA (as a proxy of intellectual achievement), general self-efficacy, self-efficacy in emotion regulation, emotional acceptance, and social desirability. In all cases, the predicted associations remained significant. Therefore, our findings were not due to intellectual achievement, social desirability, higher self-efficacy in general, higher self-efficacy in emotion regulation, or higher emotional acceptance.

Discussion

People who experience more frequent pleasant emotions and less frequent unpleasant emotions over time have higher well-being and function more adaptively (e.g., Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the more frequent pleasant emotions and the less frequent unpleasant emotions people *want to* feel, the better. Our findings suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Although general preferences for anger were associated with lower well-being, preferences for anger in contexts in which it is likely to be useful were associated with higher well-being. Similarly,

⁵ The patterns of associations did not differ dramatically when examining the zero-order correlations.

Table 3

Simple Correlations Between Emotional Preferences and Preferences for Emotion-Inducing Activities in Collaborative and Confrontational Laboratory Sessions

Preferences for emotion-inducing activities	Emotional preferences						Mean (SD)
	General		Confrontation		Collaboration		
	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	Anger	Happiness	
Angry in confrontations	.18*	-.16*	.15*	-.07	.13	-.01	2.90 (1.07)
Happy in confrontations	-.03	.18*	.002	.16*	.01	.10	3.03 (1.05)
Neutral in confrontations	.11	-.02	-.08	.13	.07	.06	1.94 (0.92)
Angry in collaborations	.14†	-.03	.12	.16*	.28*	-.04	2.11 (0.99)
Happy in collaborations	-.10	.32*	-.17*	.00	-.05	.16*	3.68 (0.83)
Neutral in collaborations	.14†	-.02	-.07	.09	.09	-.01	2.14 (0.88)

* $p < .05$. † $p < .08$.

although general preferences for happiness were associated with higher well-being, preferences for happiness in contexts in which it is not likely to be useful were associated with lower well-being. These findings suggest that pursuing emotions that are useful in the moment, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant they are to experience, is associated with higher, rather than lower, well-being.

The Instrumentality of Instrumental Emotion Regulation

The present findings raise interesting possibilities regarding the implications of motives in emotion regulation for health and well-being. The instrumental approach to emotion regulation suggests that people regulate their emotions in order to achieve various goals (Bonanno, 2001; Parrott, 1993; Tamir, 2009). To the extent that any emotion can be useful or harmful in particular contexts, it may be important to pursue both pleasant and unpleasant emotions flexibly, to optimize the chances of successful goal pursuit. The present findings are the first to our knowledge to demonstrate that people who want to experience unpleasant emotions when they might be useful and those who want to avoid pleasant emotions when they are not useful are happier and more successful overall.

These findings are consistent with the idea that instrumental motives in emotion regulation, even when they entail seeking unpleasant emotions, are linked to adaptive outcomes.

Although these findings are preliminary, they suggest that the adaptive nature of emotional preferences may depend on their sensitivity to the motivational context. Our findings are consistent with the idea that emotions are likely to promote adaptation when experienced in the context for which they evolved (Coifman & Bonanno, 2009). They are also consistent with the idea that emotional flexibility is important for successful adaptation (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). People who experience context-sensitive emotions, for instance, are more likely to recover from depression (Rottenberg, Kasch, Gross, & Gotlib, 2002) and trauma (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004). Our findings are consistent with the possibility that emotional flexibility is important not only in how people emotionally react to events, but also in how they plan and regulate these emotional reactions. Perhaps to do well psychologically, it may be important not only to experience context-sensitive emotions, but also to seek them out.

Research on context sensitivity may also explain why preferences for anger in confrontation were related to more indices of adaptive functioning than preferences for happiness in collabora-

Table 4

Correlations Between Preferences for Anger and Happiness in General, in Confrontation and in Collaboration and Indices of Well-Being and Adaptive Functioning

	Emotional preferences						Mean (SD)
	General		Confrontation		Collaboration		
	Anger ^a	Happiness ^b	Anger ^a	Happiness ^b	Anger ^a	Happiness ^b	
Well-being							
Psychological well-being	-.17* (-.26*)	.18* (.22*)	.15† (.08)	-.19* (-.13)	-.28* (-.35*)	.18* (.23*)	4.20 (.64)
Life satisfaction	-.10 (-.10)	.01 (.08)	.19* (.12)	-.01 (-.03)	.01 (-.09)	.18* (.21*)	4.93 (1.30)
Adaptive functioning							
Interpersonal support	-.11 (-.16*)	.20* (.24*)	.17* (.11)	-.14† (-.11)	-.07 (-.16*)	.07 (.13)	41.29 (5.53)
College GPA	-.003 (-.05)	.25* (.25*)	.21* (.17*)	-.15† (-.12)	-.07 (-.14)	.23* (.23)	3.35 (.39)
Health in past six month	.08 (.04)	-.11 (-.11)	.18* (.15*)	.06 (.05)	.09 (.04)	-.06 (-.05)	2.99 (.83)

^a Partial correlations controlling for trait anger. ^b Partial correlations controlling for extraversion, zero-order correlations appear in parentheses.

† $p < .06$. * $p < .05$.

tion. Unpleasant emotions may be more context-sensitive than pleasant ones (e.g., Coifman & Bonanno, 2010), and so there may be unique benefits to preferring unpleasant emotions (e.g., anger) in the appropriate context, whereas this may be less so for pleasant emotions. Indeed, we found that contextual preferences for anger showed stronger associations with well-being and adaptive functioning than contextual preferences for happiness. In addition, the links between contextual preferences for anger and well-being held when controlling for perceptions of usefulness, whereas this was not necessarily the case for contextual preferences for happiness. Finally, people who preferred anger in general were not necessarily more likely to prefer anger in confrontation, whereas people who preferred happiness in general were also more likely to prefer happiness in collaboration. This suggests that sensitivity to context may be stronger in the case of anger, compared to happiness.

Another explanation is suggested by theories of self-regulation (e.g., Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989): long-term adaptive benefits may be most pronounced among people who are motivated to experience momentary displeasure to attain delayed benefits. Because anger is unpleasant, preferences for anger may show stronger links to well-being, compared to preferences for happiness, because they reflect the willingness to experience pain to attain goals.

In this investigation, we examined preferences and perceived usefulness of happiness and anger in two distinct contexts. We demonstrated that these preferences reflect different constructs and that they show differential patterns of associations with indices of well-being. Nonetheless, our findings also point to some interesting patterns of associations between specific preferences. In particular, there was a moderate positive correlation between preferences for anger in collaboration and preferences for happiness in confrontation. Furthermore, although preferences for anger in collaboration were most highly correlated with the perceived usefulness of anger in collaboration, they were also correlated with the perceived usefulness of happiness in confrontation, and vice versa. It is possible, therefore, that preferences for emotions that are not useful are not independent and that their shared variance is partly responsible for the patterns obtained with well-being. Such associations, however, were not obtained in the case of preferences for useful emotions (i.e., anger in confrontation or happiness in collaboration).

Our findings join research that critically examines links between pleasure, emotions, and well-being. For instance, there is evidence that higher well-being is not necessarily reflected in the most frequent or intense experience of pleasant emotions (Gruber, 2011; Oishi, Diener, & Lucas, 2007) and that people who value happiness to an extreme are not necessarily happier than others (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). Our findings add to this growing research by demonstrating that people who pursue more pleasant and less unpleasant emotions when they are not useful tend to experience lower, rather than greater, well-being. Together, this body of work suggests that pursuing happiness is not always linked to greater well-being.

General Versus Contextual Emotional Preferences and Well-Being

Our findings show that well-being is differentially associated with preferences for a particular emotion in specific contexts and

preferences for that emotion across contexts. This points to the importance of considering both general and contextual emotional preferences and highlights the need to understand how and why such preferences might differ.

Emotional preferences are the goals people set for emotion regulation (Bonanno, 2001; Tamir, 2009). These goals, like any other, can be organized hierarchically (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2000), with some goals focused on the short-term (e.g., I want to feel angry right now) and some focused on the long-term (i.e., I don't want to feel angry over time). People pursue both short-term and long-term goals simultaneously, even when they appear somewhat contradictory. This may be particularly likely for emotional goals, because emotions can serve as both means and ends in goal pursuit. When considering emotions as means to an end (e.g., means for successful confrontation), hedonic implications may be less relevant than usefulness. When considering emotions as end states, hedonic implications may be more relevant. Thus, on average, people may want to feel anger when confronting another, because it may be useful, but they may not want to feel anger in general, because it is unpleasant.

Our design did not allow us to test causal mechanisms. Although our findings are consistent with the idea that emotional preferences contribute to well-being, they provide no indication of such causal effects. Nonetheless, one possibility is that emotional preferences contribute to well-being, in part, by virtue of their impact on emotional experiences. Although emotional preferences and emotional experiences are conceptually distinct, emotional preferences have been shown to influence how people regulate their emotions and how they feel as a result. For instance, participants who were led to pursue a confrontational goal showed stronger preferences for anger-inducing activities and increased their anger experience upon engaging in their selected activities (Tamir & Ford, *in press*).

General emotional preferences may contribute to the experience of emotions over time. People who prefer more happiness and less anger in general, may end up experiencing more happiness and less anger over time, resulting in a more positive hedonic balance and greater well-being. In turn, contextual emotional preferences might shape momentary emotional experiences in particular contexts. People who have stronger preferences for useful emotions may be more likely to experience useful emotions, resulting in more successful goal pursuit. It is possible that people want to feel more anger when it is useful yet less anger over time. Such patterns of emotional preferences may be particularly adaptive in the long-run. These ideas, however, are speculative and should be examined empirically in the future, using experimental designs and assessing emotional preferences as well as emotional experiences.

Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions

Our study has several limitations. First, our design was correlational and does not allow us to test causal influences. Identifying the ways in which emotional preferences may contribute to well-being and adaptive functioning is one of the main challenges for future research on emotional preferences. Second, our study focused exclusively on preferences for happiness and anger. An important question is whether similar patterns might be obtained when examining preferences for other emotional experiences (e.g., fear, sadness). In addition, our self-report measures and behavioral indices of emotional preferences were based on a relatively small

number of items. Although these items were carefully selected and pilot-tested, they may differ not only in their motivational tone (e.g., in specificity) and their external validity remains to be tested. Third, although our study involved repeated measurements, to understand the stability and dynamics of the links between emotional preferences and well-being it would be useful to assess them as they change over time in a longitudinal design. Finally, our effect sizes were relatively small. This, however, is not surprising. Broad constructs such as well-being, academic success, social support, and health are typically determined by multiple factors, many of them dispositional or situational. What is surprising is the fact that emotional preferences, as measured by a short survey, were at all related to indices of well-being, measured at a different point in time. Furthermore, these associations were found when controlling for trait affect, self-efficacy, social desirability, and other related constructs.

Despite these limitations, our findings are meaningful in that they suggest that rather than seeking happiness at all times, it may be important to seek happiness at the right time. Encouraging people to seek happiness and shun unhappiness irrespective of context may not necessarily be adaptive in the long-run.

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Received September 22, 2011

Revision received January 10, 2012

Accepted January 11, 2012 ■