

Abstract

"Genes, Economics, and Happiness" with James H. Fowler (UCSD) and Bruno S. Frey (Zurich).

Research on happiness has produced valuable insights into the sources of subjective well-being. A major finding from this literature is that people exhibit a "baseline" happiness that shows persistent strength over time, and twin studies show that genes play a significant role in explaining the variance of baseline happiness between individuals. However, these studies do not identify which genes might be involved. Variation in the promotor region of the serotonin transporter gene (5HTTLPR) is a promising candidate for better understanding individual heterogeneity in subjective well-being. This functional polymorphism has previously been associated with emotional states and optimism. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health we perform a case-control association study on a representative sample of Americans (N=2,574) aged between 18 and 26 years old. We find that individuals with the transcriptionally more efficient version of the serotonin transporter gene are significantly more likely to report higher levels of life satisfaction ($p=0.005$). This result may help to explain the important genetic component of happiness. We seek to replicate this finding and extend it to a larger demography.