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Aspirations and Well-Being: When Are High Aspirations Harmful?

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Are high aspirations harmful or beneficial? The hedonic adaptation prevention model posits that lofty aspirations are detrimental to well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012), yet other research suggests that happy people tend to have higher aspirations than their less happy peers (Jacobs Bao, 2012; Jacobs Bao, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2013). The current study was designed to address the associations among height of aspirations, fulfillment of aspirations, and well-being. U.S. adults ($N = 333$) documented their well-being and aspirations over 12 weeks. Work and romantic relationship aspirations were reported each week, and fulfillment of those aspirations was assessed the following week. The height of the aspirations, as rated by objective coders, was not consistently related to well-being. However, higher aspirations were relatively less likely to be fulfilled, and lower fulfillment predicted lower well-being. Thus, high aspirations appear to be detrimental to well-being when those aspirations are not realized. The theoretical and applied implications of these findings are discussed.

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Aspirations and Well-Being: When Are High Aspirations Harmful?

What makes people happier? Many believe that meaningful shifts in well-being can be realized after positive life changes, such as buying the latest gadget, securing a promotion, or committing to a relationship (Lyubomirsky, 2013). A variety of activities and circumstantial changes allow people to experience increases in happiness, but whether such increases are long-lasting is unclear. Consistent with previous researchers' definitions (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), I conceptualize happiness (also known as subjective well-being) as a combination of high life satisfaction, frequent positive affect, and infrequent negative affect. Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that most positive life changes result in only a temporary boost in happiness, followed by a gradual return to their original baseline level (Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2011). By understanding the processes and mechanisms underlying this return to baseline (aka "hedonic adaptation"), researchers may advance understanding of how people can learn to slow the process down or arrest it entirely, thereby maintaining those initial happiness boosts. The current research focuses on people's aspirations, an important mediator of hedonic adaptation, in the context of romantic relationships and work.

Hedonic Adaptation

Hedonic adaptation is reflected in a change (gain or loss) in happiness after the experience of a valenced stimulus or event, followed by a gradual return to baseline (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Frederick and Loewenstein (1999) have argued that hedonic adaptation is evolutionarily adaptive. When individuals experience high levels of

positive or negative affect, they cannot help but focus on those intense feelings. This attention on their affect can make it difficult to function, because people need to attend to their basic needs in order to survive. Thus, people hedonically adapt as a means of reducing high arousal, allowing them to direct their attention to more important needs, as well as to novel opportunities and threats in their environments. Finally, if individuals did not adapt to the attainment of their goals, they would be less likely to aspire to and pursue even loftier and more significant goals.

To explore the process of adaptation, some researchers have used longitudinal designs to investigate changes in people's life satisfaction both before and after a major life event. For example, in two large nationally representative panel studies, participants were followed for several years before and after getting married (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Although people varied in their degree of adaptation, on average, they tended to experience a boost in life satisfaction in the years prior to marriage and a gradual decline back to baseline after marriage after about 2 years. Another intriguing result from this study was that the most initially satisfied people reacted the least strongly to marriage (i.e., experienced the smallest boost). The authors reasoned that these individuals possessed rich pre-existing social networks, even before getting married, so they may have been less dependent on marriage for their well-being than those who had weaker social networks.

In the work domain, researchers have followed people before and after experiencing another type of positive event – namely, being promoted to a new job (Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005). Employees experienced a decline in job satisfaction

prior to the promotion, an experience likely due to growing discontent at their former workplace. This decline was followed by a boost in well-being after starting the new job – a phenomenon that the authors dubbed the "honeymoon effect." This boost, however, was followed by an eventual decline in job satisfaction back to baseline levels (i.e., the "hangover effect"). The results of this study, as well as the marriage study cited above, support the idea that adaptation to positive events is relatively rapid and complete.

The current research focuses on positive events. However, to date, investigators who study hedonic adaptation have primarily targeted negative life events. Their research suggests that people adapt to negative events less quickly and less completely than to positive events. For example, in two large nationally representative panel studies, participants were followed for several years before and after the onset of a long-term disability (Lucas, 2007). Participants experienced a decline in life satisfaction around the time of the onset of the disability, and, on average, appeared to develop a new, lower baseline for life satisfaction, never returning to their initial satisfaction levels. Similarly, in a 15-year study, individuals who became unemployed experienced a drop in life satisfaction, followed by a gradual ascent towards baseline (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). However, during the course of the study, participants did not fully return to their baseline life satisfaction levels. Thus, participants adapted to unemployment, but the adaptation was not complete.

In an 18-year panel study examining divorce, Lucas (2005) again found evidence for people's failure to adapt completely to negative events. In the years leading up to a divorce, life satisfaction began to decrease, but started to increase again in the years after

the divorce. However, the participants never returned to baseline during the course of the study. In a similar panel study, participants were followed for at least 2 years before becoming widows and for 2 years after (Lucas et al., 2003; Lucas & Clark, 2006). On average, widows and widowers exhibited a decline in life satisfaction after experiencing the death of a spouse, from which they never fully recovered. Interestingly, participants varied in their reactions to widowhood, such that some actually experienced an increase in life satisfaction after the death of their spouses. These individuals may have been burdened by caretaking responsibilities for their spouses. Other participants showed a decline but gradually returned to a point slightly below their baselines (i.e., they did not fully recover, but approached baseline), whereas some participants experienced a severe decline in life satisfaction and demonstrated only a small increase in life satisfaction afterwards. In sum, although it is possible that people would eventually fully recover if followed for longer periods of time, the longitudinal research on changes in well-being suggests that people do not fully recover from major negative life events. At the very least, these studies tell us that adaptation to negative life events is a slow process.

The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention Model

Notably, the literature suggests that, whereas hedonic adaptation to negative experiences is desirable, hedonic adaptation to positive experiences may be one of the biggest obstacles to happiness. After all, if people ultimately "get used to" everything positive that happens in their lives, then how can they ever become happier? The implication is that an individual who wishes to increase his or her happiness would do well to put effort into thwarting adaptation. For example, those who experience a positive

life event (such as getting a promotion) may be able to use certain strategies to either slow or stop adaptation. According to the Hedonic Adaptation Prevention (HAP) Model (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012; see Figure 1), adaptation unfolds via two paths – through decreases in positive emotions and through increases in aspirations.

According to the HAP model, when someone experiences a positive change, such as a professional promotion, that change will generate a stream of positive events, which, in turn, will trigger increases in positive emotions. For example, after a worker begins a higher-status job, he experiences new positive events (e.g., receiving higher pay, trying out new job duties, and being congratulated by coworkers) and thus more positive emotions (e.g., excitement, energy, interest). This leads to a boost in happiness. However, over time, these positive events and positive emotions become less frequent, so he experiences fewer and smaller boosts in happiness, and thus begins to adapt. In this case, positive events and positive emotions are mediators of the adaptation process.

Another path that underlies the process of adaptation, and the one that is the focus of this paper, involves a rise in aspiration levels, which typically occurs after individuals experience a positive change and the subsequent increase in positive events. In other words, over time, the positive events begin to become expected and predictable, and thus do not lift one's well-being as much as they used to. Aspirations are another mediator of adaptation, such that higher aspirations are associated with lower well-being. For example, after the newly promoted employee receives his paycheck with his new, higher salary, he starts to expect that higher salary and to become accustomed to all of the new

objects and outings he can purchase with it. Accordingly, each additional paycheck leads to less of a gain in well-being than the previous one. He may even start to develop higher aspirations (e.g., desiring an even bigger raise or setting his sights on buying more luxury items with his paycheck), so the once-a-week fancy dinner does not provide as much of a boost in well-being as it once did. Thus, maintaining reasonable aspirations may be critical to slowing or arresting hedonic adaptation.

According to the HAP model, both paths underlying the course of hedonic adaptation are also moderated by two key variables – variety and appreciation. First, the more varied the positive events, the longer it takes to adapt to them. Second, the less a person appreciates a positive change in her circumstances, whether the change involves taking a romance to the next level or earning a new challenging responsibility at work, the more quickly she adapts. Striving to increase one's appreciation of positive changes, as well injecting more variety into one's experiences, are important to learning how to forestall adaptation.

In the first simultaneous test of all of the paths posited by the HAP model, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) asked participants about a positive life change (e.g., a new relationship, a change in jobs, or a new hobby) they had made in the previous 6 weeks. Still experiencing the positive life change 6 weeks later predicted more positive emotions and higher aspirations (i.e., wanting even more) for the positive change. Furthermore, higher aspirations predicted lower well-being, and more positive emotions predicted higher well-being 6 weeks later. Clearly, the HAP model needs to be tested

with multiple samples to make any definitive claims, but the results of the first test provide compelling support for its predictions.

The Role of Aspirations

As mentioned above, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2012) found that higher aspirations predict lower well-being, supporting the Hedonic Adaptation Prevention model. In other words, lofty aspirations can be harmful to a person's happiness because they may be more difficult to achieve and thus less likely to be met. Research on the pursuit of happiness supports this claim, finding that unrealistic expectations are detrimental to well-being (Ford & Gruber, in press). Aspirations may also continue to escalate, such that a person will never be satisfied with what she has. Yet, other studies have found a positive relationship between well-being and aspirations, with higher well-being being associated with higher aspirations (e.g., Jacobs Bao, 2012). What can account for this inconsistency? One possibility is that the correlation between well-being and aspirations may remain positive until aspirations fail to be met. For example, happy people may fulfill their aspirations more often (perhaps due to better mood or better resources), thus rendering them happier. They also may further develop higher aspirations. As long as those aspirations continue to be fulfilled, they will remain happy and perhaps become even happier.

To be sure, an individual may be more likely to achieve her aspirations when those aspirations are reasonable and realistic. For example, an employee may wish to earn a perfect performance review. If this is a reasonable aspiration, it will likely be attained, potentially increasing her happiness. In this case, having a relatively high

aspiration is associated with higher well-being, as long as that aspiration continues to be realized. High aspirations may even act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Locke & Latham, 1991), in that higher aspirations may render one more likely to succeed. Holding ambitious aspirations may cause one to have greater self-confidence and put forth more effort toward attaining those aspirations, thus making one more likely to achieve them. However, when an individual's aspirations fail to be realized – a possibility made more likely by aspirations that are relatively high and unreasonable – then he would likely experience a decrement in well-being. For example, if an employee hopes to and feels entitled to receive a perfect performance review, but his boss frequently has to prompt him to stay on task at work, then his aspiration is unreasonable and unlikely to be met. Accordingly, his relatively high aspiration will undermine well-being, perhaps due to disappointment in not achieving his aspiration. It may be, then, that high aspirations are most harmful when they are unreasonably high, are not achieved, or both.

In light of its complexity, greater research attention needs to be paid to the relation between aspirations and well-being, particularly in cases where the aspirations are not met. By addressing these cases, my study aims to clarify the conditions under which the relationship between aspirations and well-being is positive versus negative. Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of how aspirations relate to well-being could provide guidance to individuals on how to improve their well-being by adjusting their own aspirations. For example, if high aspirations are beneficial when they are realistic and harmful when they are impractical or idealistic, then a person striving to be happier could examine her aspirations with a mind to their feasibility. Furthermore, this new

insight may lead her to alter unrealistic aspirations to make them more practical and more likely to be fulfilled, and thus more likely to be associated with greater well-being.

The present study examines aspirations in the specific domains of work and relationships, assessed longitudinally over the course of 3 months in an adult community sample. My aim was to test how well-being, aspiration height, and aspiration fulfillment are interrelated. Investigating the relation between aspirations and well-being longitudinally allowed me to observe the long-term effects on well-being of naturally-occurring aspirations, and to understand how these variables might be related over time.

Hypotheses

The present study aimed to test two primary hypotheses, as well as address a research question. First, I hypothesized that aspirations and well-being will be negatively correlated overall, as suggested by the HAP model (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

Second, I hypothesized that fulfilling one's aspirations will be associated with well-being, such that failing to fulfill aspirations will predict low well-being. In other words, I expected people who frequently fulfill their aspirations to be happy. When their aspirations are not met, however, people will be sad or disappointed, and their well-being is likely to decline.

A research question remained, however: Would higher aspirations be less likely to be met than lower aspirations? If people who are highly capable and realistic about their abilities hold high aspirations, then relatively high aspirations may be just as likely to be achieved as low ones. If, however, people have a tendency to gradually escalate their

aspirations past the point where the aspirations cannot be attained, then higher aspirations will be associated with lower well-being.

Method

Participants

Participants were 333 employed U.S. adults who were in a romantic relationship (50% male, 49% female, 1% other). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68 years old (M = 31.1). The majority (78.7%) identified themselves as Caucasian, with smaller numbers of participants identifying themselves as Asian (6.3%), African American (5.7%), Latino/a (4.5%), or more than one ethnicity (1.8%). Less than 1% of participants identified themselves as either American Indian/Alaskan Native or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. They were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), an Internet site on which people can sign up for small tasks, such as completing questionnaires, clicking on links, or sorting pictures into different categories. Participants were paid for completing the study.

Procedure

Participants completed a pretest ("preselection") questionnaire, and those who were both employed and in a romantic relationship were recruited into the study. They were randomly assigned into one of two groups – the Aspirations group (n = 167) and the Control group (n = 166). Both groups were administered all measures, except that the Control group was not asked any questions about aspirations. All participants completed the measures once a week over 12 weeks. Each week, they were asked about their well-

being and aspirations for the *next* week. Starting with the second week, participants were also asked about the outcomes of their previous week's aspirations.

Materials

Pretest. We collected information about the participants' sex, ethnicity, relationship status, and employment status. Then, we invited those who were in romantic relationships and currently employed to participate in the study.

Weekly happiness. We measured participants' current happiness each week using a general affect measure ("How did you feel during the past week?") and a life satisfaction measure ("How satisfied with your life have you felt during the past week?"). To reduce recall or practice effects, participants used a sliding scale, which ranged from *extremely negative* to *extremely positive* for the affect question and *extremely dissatisfied* to *extremely satisfied* for the satisfaction question. The slider records scores from -10 to 10, but the participants were not able to see these numbers. Cronbach's α for the two items ranged from .92 to .97 over the 12 weeks of the study.

Modified Differential Emotions Scale. We measured positive emotions using the 12 positive items from the 19-item Modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Each item consists of a set of three emotions (e.g., "I have felt glad, happy, joyful"), and participants are instructed to choose the greatest amount of each set of emotions felt that week, from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*most of the time*). Cronbach's α ranged from .89 to .93.

Work aspirations. Participants listed one work aspiration in each of three categories—pay and promotion opportunities, relationships with coworkers and

supervisors, and work itself. They also rated how likely it is that each aspiration would happen, from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*).

Relationship aspirations. Similar to the work aspirations, participants listed one relationship aspiration in each of three categories—commitment, passion and romance, and intimacy—and rated the likelihood that the aspiration would be achieved using the same 7-point Likert-type scale.

Previous week's aspirations. Participants were shown each aspiration they had listed the previous week and asked to rate the degree to which that aspiration was fulfilled, using a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*).

Aspiration height. Three undergraduate research assistants rated the height of each aspiration both between- and within-participants, from 1 (*extremely low*) to 7 (*extremely high*). For the between-participant height ratings, raters compared each participant's aspiration to all of the other participants' aspirations. For the within-participant height ratings, raters compared each participant's aspiration to that participant's aspirations for the other weeks of the study. For example, the following relationship aspiration provided by one of the participants was rated highly: "she will decide to move back here from Dallas where her job is so she can be more committed to me than the job." By contrast, this participant's relationship aspiration was rated as low: "My husband will do the few things I have asked him to do!" Inter-rater reliability of the aspirations, assessed using the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC), was adequate. For relationship aspirations, the average ICC was .39 for between-participant height ratings

and .40 for within-participant height ratings. For work aspirations, the average ICC was .43 for between-participant height ratings and .57 for within-participant height ratings.

Results

Overview of Analyses

Given the longitudinal nature of the design, I used multilevel modeling to analyze the data (with SAS proc mixed). For each set of analyses, the dependent variable was predicted by the independent variable, controlling for the previous week's value of the dependent variable (for a similar approach, see Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2013, Study 3; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008, Study 2). For example, current happiness was predicted by current height of aspirations, controlling for last week's happiness. This method was used, rather than a typical growth model, because I did not expect any particular pattern of change over time[1]. For each dependent variable, I first compared an unconditional means model (with just the intercept as a predictor) to a model with the intercept and previous value of the dependent variable as predictors. The latter model was then compared to a model with the intercept, previous level of the dependent variable, and the independent variable as predictors. Below is a generic depiction of the final model:

$$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}\text{Previous}_{ij} + \gamma_{20}\text{Predictor}_{ij} + [\zeta_{0i} + \zeta_{1i}\text{Previous}_{ij} + \zeta_{2i}\text{Predictor}_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}]$$

The dependent variable (Y_{ij}) is the current value of the variable of interest (for example, current happiness). The intercept term (γ_{00}) represents the grand mean of the dependent

[1] I also analyzed the data with a two-part quadratic growth model, and the results were very similar to those reported below.

variable (e.g., happiness) at baseline. The γ_{10} parameter represents the previous week's value of the dependent variable (e.g. last week's happiness), allowing me to control for prior levels of the dependent variable. The γ_{20} parameter is associated with the independent variable of interest (e.g., height of aspirations). The portion of the model in brackets represents the error terms.

Group Differences

One potential negative outcome of asking participants to list their aspirations and then report whether these aspirations were fulfilled each week is that it could make participants unhappy. That is, the very act of making aspirations salient could lead to unintended hedonic consequences. To test this possibility, I compared the Aspiration group, who were asked questions about their aspirations and well-being each week, to the Control group, who only completed measures of well-being. Adjusting for prior levels of weekly happiness, condition did marginally significantly predict differences in happiness, such that being in the Control group was associated with higher levels of happiness, χ^2 (1) = 3.0, p = .08 (see Table 1). Condition did not significantly predict differences in positive affect, controlling for previous positive affect, χ^2 (1) = 0.2, p = .65. Thus, asking participants about their aspirations did not appear to erode their positive affect, although it did marginally diminish their weekly happiness relative to the Control group. Because my hypotheses concerned participants' aspirations, I will focus on the Aspiration group for the rest of the analyses.

Aspiration Height and Well-Being

Correlations. First, I computed bivariate correlations between height, as rated between- and within-participants, and measures of well-being at each time point. The correlations were very small on average (see Table 2). The average correlation between well-being and height of relationship aspirations was 0.003, and the average correlation between well-being and the height of work aspirations was -0.054. The majority of these correlations were negative and non-significant. Thus, there appears to be no relationship between aspiration height and measures of well-being when assessed cross-sectionally at each point in time.

Aspiration height as a predictor of well-being. Using multilevel modeling, current between- and within-participant ratings of height were used as predictors of current well-being. The between-participant height of relationship aspirations was not a significant predictor of weekly happiness or positive affect, controlling for the previous week's happiness or positive affect, $\chi^2(4) = 7.0$, $p = .14$; $\chi^2(4) = 5.6$, $p = .23$ (see Table 3). Within-participant height of relationship aspirations did not significantly predict weekly happiness, controlling for previous levels of happiness, $\chi^2(4) = 7.8$, $p = .10$, but it did significantly predict positive affect, controlling for previous levels of positive affect, $\chi^2(4) = 13.0$, $p = .01$, such that higher aspirations were associated with higher positive affect. Work aspiration height, as rated between- and within-participants was not a significant predictor of weekly happiness or positive affect (p's > .34; see Table 3). Overall, aspiration height did not serve as a consistent predictor of well-being, thus failing to support Hypothesis 1.

Well-being as a predictor of aspiration height. I hypothesized that aspiration height would predict well-being, but the opposite temporal direction is also possible. For these analyses, I predicted between- and within-participant height from well-being using multilevel modeling. Controlling for prior levels of happiness, current happiness was not a significant predictor of relationship aspiration height, as rated between-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 6.8$, $p = .15$, or within-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 5.5$, $p = .24$ (see Table 4). Happiness was also not a significant predictor of work aspiration height, as rated between-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 1.2$, $p = .88$, or within-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 5.1$, $p = .28$, controlling for prior levels of happiness.

Positive affect was not a significant predictor of between-participant height of relationship aspirations, controlling for prior levels of positive affect, $\chi^2(4) = 6.3$, $p = .18$. However, positive affect was a significant predictor of within-participant height of relationship aspirations, adjusting for previous levels of positive affect, $\chi^2(4) = 11.6$, $p = .02$, such that higher positive affect was associated with higher aspiration height. Positive affect was not a significant predictor of work aspiration height, as rated between-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 2.7$, $p = .61$, or within-participants, $\chi^2(4) = 2.0$, $p = .74$, controlling for prior levels of positive affect. Overall, neither happiness nor positive affect significantly predicted height of relationship or job aspirations, with the exception of positive affect predicting within-participant height of relationship aspirations.

The results from these sets of analyses (i.e., height predicting well-being and well-being predicting height) are consistent with the correlation findings, suggesting that there is no clear relationship between well-being and height of aspirations.

Aspiration Fulfillment and Well-Being

Correlations. Bivariate correlations were computed between self-reported aspiration fulfillment and well-being at each time point. Fulfillment of relationship aspirations was positively correlated with both happiness (M_r = 0.33, range = 0.21–0.49) and positive affect (M_r = 0.40, range = 0.29–0.51). Fulfillment of work aspirations was also positively correlated with both happiness (M_r = 0.31, range = 0.13–0.59) and positive affect (M_r = 0.34, range = 0.05–0.63). In sum, correlations were positive and moderate, on average, suggesting that higher levels of aspiration fulfillment were associated with higher levels of well-being, for both relationship and work aspirations.

Aspiration fulfillment as a predictor of well-being. Multilevel modeling was used to predict well-being from aspiration fulfillment. Aspiration fulfillment was a significant predictor of happiness, controlling for prior levels of fulfillment, for both relationship, $\chi^2(4) = 50.0$, $p < .001$, and work aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 45.3$, $p < .001$ (see Table 5). Similarly, adjusting for prior levels of fulfillment, current fulfillment significantly predicted positive affect for both relationship, $\chi^2(4) = 51.7$, $p < .001$, and work aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 41.1$, $p < .001$. Thus, similar to the correlation findings, aspiration fulfillment was a significant predictor of well-being, such that higher levels of fulfillment predicted higher levels of happiness and positive affect (and thus, lower fulfillment predicted lower well-being), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Well-being as a predictor of aspiration fulfillment. I also used multilevel modeling to test the opposite direction—that is, did well-being predict aspiration fulfillment? Controlling for prior happiness, weekly happiness did not significantly

predict fulfillment of relationship aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 1.4$, $p = .84$, or work aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 4.6$, $p = .33$ (see Table 6). Similarly, positive affect did not significantly predict fulfillment of relationship aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 3.9$, $p = .42$ or work aspirations, $\chi^2(4) = 7.8$, $p = .10$.

Overall, aspiration fulfillment was clearly a better predictor of well-being than the opposite direction, suggesting that the association between well-being and fulfillment is being driven more by the effect of fulfillment on later well-being than by the effect of well-being on later fulfillment.

Aspiration Height and Aspiration Fulfillment

Correlations. Bivariate correlations between aspiration height and aspiration fulfillment across all time points were, on average, small and negative. The average correlation between fulfillment of relationship aspirations and height was -0.06 (range = -0.2 –0.12) for between-participants aspiration height and -0.10 (range = -0.27–0.06) for within-participant aspiration height. Similarly, the average correlation between fulfillment of work aspirations and height was -0.08 (range = -0.21–0.10) for between-participants aspiration height and -0.06 (range = -0.26–0.10) for within-participant aspiration height. These correlations, although small, were negative on average, indicating that higher aspirations were associated with lower fulfillment.

Aspiration height as a predictor of aspiration fulfillment. Multilevel models were used to predict aspiration fulfillment from aspiration height. Relationship aspiration height significantly negatively predicted fulfillment of relationship aspirations, controlling for prior height, for both between-participants height, $\chi^2(4) = 9.6$, $p = .05$, and

within-participants height, $\chi^2(4) = 21.1$, $p < .001$ (see Table 7). In other words, higher aspirations for one's relationships were subsequently less likely to be fulfilled. Work aspiration height did not significantly predict fulfillment of work aspirations, controlling for prior height, for either between-participants height, $\chi^2(4) = 1.7$, $p = .79$, or within-participants height, $\chi^2(4) = 6.6$, $p = .16$. However, the results trended in the same direction as those for relationship aspirations. In sum, the results suggest that high aspirations are detrimental for fulfillment, but the effect was only significant for relationship aspirations.

Aspiration fulfillment as a predictor of aspiration height. I also tested aspiration fulfillment as a predictor of later aspiration height. For relationship aspirations, current aspiration fulfillment, controlling for previous fulfillment, significantly predicted both between-participant height, $\chi^2(4) = 10.0$, $p = .04$, and within-participant height, $\chi^2(4) = 14.9$, $p = .005$, such that higher fulfillment predicted lower aspirations (see Table 8). For work aspirations, fulfillment did not significantly predict between-participant height, $\chi^2(4) = 3.7$, $p = .45$, controlling for prior levels of fulfillment. Work aspiration fulfillment marginally negatively significantly predicted within-participant aspiration height, $\chi^2(4) = 9.1$, $p = .06$, controlling for prior levels of fulfillment.

I did not hypothesize a particular directionality to the relationship between aspiration height and fulfillment, and the results indicate that the causality may run both ways. Higher relationship aspirations predicted lower subsequent fulfillment of those aspirations, and higher fulfillment predicted lower subsequent aspirations. Although most

of the analyses for work aspirations were not significant, the results trended in the same direction as those for relationship aspirations.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study provide evidence for the importance of aspirations to people's well-being. Contrary to the first hypothesis, aspiration height was not significantly related to well-being. That is, happier people did not have lower—or higher—aspirations for their work and love lives than their less happy peers. However, higher aspirations were less likely to be fulfilled, and, as hypothesized, failure to fulfill them was associated with lower well-being later on. Thus, higher aspirations may be harmful to the extent that they are not realistic and realizable.

Although the correlations between aspiration height and well-being were small, they were mostly negative, as hypothesized and as the HAP model would predict (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Lyubomirsky, 2011). Previous studies have found that having higher aspirations is associated with greater well-being than having lower aspirations (e.g., Jacobs Bao, 2012; Jacobs Bao, Boehm, & Lyubomirsky, 2013); however, these earlier studies used a more global aspirations measure (e.g., "How do you expect to feel next week?"; Jacobs Bao et al., 2013; Jacobs Bao, 2012), and thus were likely tapping into optimism or positive thinking, rather than actual aspirations. When more specific aspirations were measured in the current study (e.g., "What are you hoping for over the course of this week at work?"), this effect seemed to disappear.

Perhaps aspiration height is a better predictor of well-being when one takes into account how realistic the aspirations are. In other words, knowing that a person aspires to

become manager of her department may not be enough to predict her well-being. What may also matter is whether her aspiration is realistic and attainable—for example, whether the management position will be open in the near future and whether the employee is qualified. If her high aspiration is realistic, then she will be relatively more likely to attain it, so one would expect her to become happier after she fulfills the aspiration. However, if she is unqualified or the current manager has no plans to vacate the position, then her high aspiration could lower her happiness.

As predicted, greater fulfillment of aspirations was associated with greater well-being, such that people who were unable to realize their aspirations experienced lower well-being the following week. Thus, failure to fulfill one's aspirations in one's job and significant relationship did indeed appear to be harmful to well-being. Fulfillment may have served as a proxy for realism in the current study. Aspirations that are realistic and able to be fulfilled may provide a boost to happiness after they are actually achieved, whereas aspirations that are impractical and idealistic may be harmful when a person fails to achieve them.

Interestingly, although aspiration fulfillment predicted later well-being, well-being did not predict later fulfillment. That is, people who were happy during a particular week were no more likely to fulfill their aspirations than people who were unhappy that week. This finding is inconsistent with previous research, which suggests that happiness leads to successful outcomes (see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005, for a review). However, I used well-being to predict *changes in* fulfillment, rather than baseline fulfillment. It may be that well-being predicts baseline or aggregate levels of fulfillment,

but not week-to-week changes in the likelihood that one's aspirations are realized. Happy people may be more likely to achieve their aspirations in general, because their frequent experiences of positive affect help to build personal resources, such as social support, that aid them in realizing their aspirations (Fredrickson, 2001). Being happier during a particular week of the study, however, did not make it more likely that individuals would achieve their aspirations that week.

By contrast, week-to-week fluctuations in the extent to which an individual's aspirations are fulfilled may be more powerfully driven by small circumstantial or environmental changes than by how generally happy that individual is. For example, a person may fail to have a successful meeting with a client due a number of transient factors: His coworker forgot to give him the materials on time, the client changed her mind on what she wanted, or the client was having a bad day. Any of these factors could influence the realization of his aspiration this week, but are unrelated to his current happiness level. When averaged over time, however, the effects of these transient chance factors might cancel each other out, while more enduring factors (such as how generally happy a person is) might have a stronger effect on fulfillment.

Finally, I posed the question of whether higher aspirations are less likely to be fulfilled, and indeed, higher aspirations were associated with lower fulfillment. Higher aspirations (e.g., I hope my boyfriend will propose on our anniversary) are, by definition, more difficult to realize than lower aspirations (e.g., I hope my boyfriend will buy me flowers for our anniversary). However, high aspirations could still be reasonable, and thus have the potential to be realized. Surprisingly, analyses of the opposite temporal

relationship showed that fulfilling one's aspirations one week was associated with reporting lower aspirations the next week. This finding is somewhat puzzling, because one might expect that if a person attains her aspirations, she would desire the same or even more in the future, because prior fulfillment is a signal that her aspirations were reasonable. Furthermore, achieving her aspirations could boost her confidence in her abilities and trigger an upward spiral, whereby the positive emotions elicited from fulfilling her aspirations allow her to build resources that will aid in achieving future aspirations (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001). Perhaps participants began the study by listing the loftiest aspirations they felt capable of fulfilling, and in subsequent weeks, listed more mundane, everyday aspirations. Future studies may be able to shed light on this unexpected finding.

Another potentially important finding concerned whether simply asking people about their aspirations affects their well-being. Comparisons between participants who were questioned about their aspirations and those who were not revealed that asking about participants' aspirations marginally lowered their happiness (but not their positive affect). Thus, prompting people to consciously declare their aspirations and report on the fulfillment of those aspirations was slightly detrimental to their well-being in this study. This finding needs to be replicated to ensure its robustness. If the pattern holds, however, then researchers, mental health practitioners, and career counselors need to be aware of the costs of repeatedly inquiring about people's aspirations. Furthermore, the effect may be amplified in a longer-term study, such that people continually asked to monitor their aspirations and subsequent degree of fulfillment for many months may be continually

reminded of their failures to realize those aspirations. Indeed, previous research has indicated that asking about happiness too often can backfire and ultimately undermine rather than increase happiness (Ford & Mauss, in press; Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003). Asking about aspirations too often may have a similarly adverse effect on happiness.

Limitations

This study had three limitations worth noting. First, participants were asked to list aspirations that they hoped to fulfill within the next week, and then reported on fulfillment one week later. As a result, these short-term aspirations may be smaller or less important to participants than longer-term aspirations. However, prior research suggests that small, day-to-day events may actually have larger effects on psychological well-being than major life events (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Thus, relatively small aspirations may still exert important effects on people's well-being. An additional drawback to assessing fulfillment only one week later is that participants may not realize a particular aspiration until after several weeks have passed or after the study is over. Consequently, I may have failed to capture the full range of the effect of fulfilling a particular aspiration on well-being, which may have led to a restriction of range. Because fulfillment was self-reported and subjective, it is difficult to differentiate between ultimate and partial fulfillment in the current study. Future studies could analyze differences in degree of fulfillment across both short-term and long-term time frames to determine whether this is truly a limitation.

A second limitation is that fulfillment was self-rated. Thus, participants' responses may be biased by optimism or positive thinking, which could potentially inflate (or deflate) their ratings of fulfillment. For example, an optimist may view any step taken toward her aspiration as moderate fulfillment, because she is progressing toward her aspiration, whereas a pessimist would report the same amount of progress as low fulfillment, because much more is needed before he can completely realize his aspiration. In the future, more objective measures of fulfillment may be used to avoid this limitation, such as peer ratings of fulfillment or objective scores (e.g., GPA, employee evaluations, partner satisfaction). However, well-being is likely to be more strongly related to subjective than objective ratings of fulfillment, because people's perceptions of their progress may be more salient and impactful for them than their actual progress.

The final, and perhaps biggest, limitation of this study is that causality cannot be determined. Are higher aspirations actually more difficult to fulfill, or is some third variable (e.g., narcissism, a high-pressure job, or naiveté about the relevant domain) causing people to have both high aspirations and to fail to fulfill them? Although I examined both causal directions using multilevel modeling for each hypothesis, the only way to answer this causal question is to experimentally manipulate aspirations.

Future Directions

Although in the current study coders only rated the height of participants' aspirations, future studies could examine other characteristics of aspirations that may relate to well-being. For example, aspirations could be coded as concrete or abstract. Specific, concrete aspirations (e.g., "I hope to go out to dinner two nights this week with

my boyfriend") may relate more strongly to well-being than more general, abstract aspirations (e.g., "I hope to receive more social support from my boyfriend this week"), because it is more obvious when concrete aspirations are not achieved. A person can easily count dates, but it is harder to quantify social support. Research on positive illusions in romantic relationships provides support for this idea, suggesting that holding accurate *specific* perceptions of one's partner, rather than accurate global perceptions, is more closely associated with positive outcomes within the relationship, because inaccurate specific perceptions can be more easily disproven (Neff & Karney, 2005).

In the future, researchers could follow people for longer periods of time, to obtain a more complete picture of how aspirations and well-being relate over time. With a longer assessment period, investigators could examine partial fulfillment of aspirations and continue to track progress on those aspirations beyond a one-week follow-up. As mentioned earlier, low weekly aspiration fulfillment in the current study could still signify satisfactory progress that will later result in ultimate fulfillment. However, such ultimate fulfillment was potentially never captured, because the achievement of each aspiration was only assessed one week after the aspiration was reported. A longer-term study, perhaps over the course of several years, would be more likely to capture the ultimate fulfillment of a greater number of aspirations than a shorter-term study.

Following participants for longer periods of time could also allow investigators to assess an aspect of the hedonic adaptation prevention model that was not captured in the current study. According to the hedonic adaptation prevention model, one reason aspirations are harmful to well-being is that they can continue to rise, and thus one is

never satisfied with one's current state of affairs (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012). High aspirations may act as a signal of underlying restlessness with the status quo. To aspire above one's current circumstances may imply dissatisfaction with those circumstances. For example, if a worker is fully satisfied with his job, he is relatively less likely to desire a change in job status, be it a promotion or a raise. His colleague, however, may hope for a raise, and after she receives it, she may start to covet even more. Indeed, she may never be satisfied with her current salary, because she is always imagining how much higher it could potentially be. As a result, she may not savor or feel truly grateful for what she does have, and thus will rapidly adapt to any further increase in salary.

This escalation of aspirations is important yet difficult to test. Future research could target this aspect of hedonic adaptation by assessing within-person changes in height of a single aspiration or set of aspirations. For example, after an individual earns a raise, her aspirations about the increase in salary could be followed over time, to establish whether those aspirations follow a pattern of escalation. If tracked over a long period of time, meaningful changes in the height or number of her aspirations may be captured.

Although fulfillment of participants' aspirations was used as a proxy for assessing how realistic or attainable those aspirations were, future studies could assess attainability more directly by asking people to rate each aspiration they list. Although the very act of assessing the extent to which their aspirations are realistic could potentially affect participants' responses (e.g., they may begin to list more attainable aspirations if they realize that their previous aspirations had been relatively unattainable). However, this

additional measure could shed light on the relation between height, realism, and fulfillment of aspirations.

As mentioned previously, the best way to clarify the causal direction of the hypothesized pathways is to experimentally manipulate aspirations. In future studies, researchers could test how manipulating the height of people's aspirations affects their well-being and the attainment of those aspirations. Transient mood and perceived fulfillment could also be manipulated, to assess their impact on the height of the aspirations. Such experiments will provide a clearer picture of the causal relationships between well-being and aspirations.

Aspirations clearly play an important role in people's lives. The loftiness of one's aspirations and the extent to which they are realized collectively make up one of the key mediators of hedonic adaptation. Thus, a greater understanding of how aspirations relate to well-being will further inform both researchers and laypeople on the steps individuals can take to thwart adaptation to positive life changes and sustain any gains in well-being. If people want to live happily ever after in their romantic relationships or in their jobs, maintaining realistic, achievable aspirations is critical.

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Table 1

Condition Predicting Well-Being Measures.

		Happiness as Outcome		Positive Affect as Outcome	
Effect	Parameter	Baseline (Controlling for Previous Week's Happiness)	Condition as Predictor	Baseline (Controlling for Previous Week's Positive Affect)	Condition as Predictor
Fixed Effects					
Intercept	γ_{00}	0.13***	-5.07^{+}	-0.04	-1.71
Previous Well-Being	γ_{10}	0.39***	0.40***	0.29***	0.29***
Condition	γ_{20}	--	0.05^{+}	--	0.02
Random Effects					
Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.45***	0.45***	0.47***	0.47***
Level 2	σ^2_{0}	0.13***	0.12***	0.27***	0.27***
	σ^2_{1}	0.06***	0.06***	0.47***	0.09***
Goodness of Fit					
Deviance		4555.0	4552.0	4828.2	4828.0
AIC		4567.0	4566.0	4840.2	4842.0
BIC		4589.8	4592.5	4863.0	4868.6

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. Positive γ_{20} values indicate higher means for the Control group.

Table 2

Summary of Correlations Between Aspiration Height and Well-Being Measures.

	Well-Being	Positive Affect
	M (Range)	*M* (Range)
Relationship Aspirations		
Between-Ps Height	-0.028 (-0.14 – 0.10)	0.0034 (-0.077 – 0.13)
Within-Ps Height	0.0034 (-0.082 – 0.11)	0.032 (-0.10 – 0.14)
Work Aspirations		
Between-Ps Height	-0.079 (-0.18 – 0.025)	-0.098 (-0.26 – 0.016)
Within-Ps Height	-0.017 (-0.15 – 0.085)	-0.022 (-0.18 – 0.16)

Note. These correlations are averages of the correlations between height and well-being at each time point. Significance tests were not conducted on the correlations in this table, because the independence assumption was not met.

Table 3

Aspiration Height Predicting Well-Being Measures.

			Relationship Aspirations – Between-Ps Height		Relationship Aspirations – Within-Ps Height		Work Aspirations – Between-Ps Height		Work Aspirations – Within-Ps Height	
	Effect	Parameter	Hap.	PA	Hap.	PA	Hap.	PA	Hap.	PA
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.07	-0.06	0.07	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	0.06	-0.05
	Previous Well-Being	γ_{10}	0.41***	0.29***	0.40***	0.27***	0.40***	0.29***	0.39***	0.30***
	Between-Ps Height	γ_{20}	0.02	0.03	--	--	-0.001	-0.03	--	--
	Within - Ps Height	γ_{20}	--	--	0.05*	0.06^{+}	--	--	0.05^{+}	0.02
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.49***	0.52***	0.49***	0.50***	0.48***	0.52***	0.48***	0.53***
	Level 2	σ^2_0	0.12**	0.27***	0.14**	0.31***	0.15**	0.28***	0.16***	0.27***
		σ^2_1	0.04*	0.08**	0.04*	0.07**	0.04*	0.08**	0.04*	0.08**
		σ^2_2	0.02	0.02	$1.9\text{x}10^{-19}$	0.03*	$9.9\text{x}10^{-19}$	0.02	$4.6\text{x}10^{-19}$	0.005
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		2075.3	2223.3	2101.1	2236.5	2047.9	2207.8	2072.6	2230.7
	AIC		2095.3	2243.3	2119.1	2256.5	2065.9	2227.8	2090.6	2250.7
	BIC		2124.0	2271.9	2145.1	2285.3	2091.7	2256.5	2116.5	2279.5

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. Hap = Happiness. PA = Positive Affect.

Table 4

Well-Being Predicting Aspiration Height.

			Relationships				Work			
			Happiness		Positive Affect		Happiness		Positive Affect	
	Effect	Parameter	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.16*	-0.007	0.16*	-0.003	-0.16**	-0.05	-0.15**	-0.04
	Previous Height	γ_{10}	0.19***	0.16***	0.17***	0.16***	0.21***	0.17***	0.21***	0.17
	Happiness	γ_{20}	0.02	0.07^{+}	--	--	-0.0007	0.05	--	--
	Positive Affect	γ_{20}	--	--	0.02	0.07^{+}	--	--	-0.02	0.01
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.50***	0.76***	0.50***	0.73***	0.50***	0.70***	0.50***	0.70***
	Level 2	σ^2_0	0.34***	0.25***	0.35***	0.23***	0.27***	0.18***	0.26***	0.19***
		σ^2_1	0.04*	0.01	0.04*	0.01	0.03*	0.04*	0.03^{+}	0.04*
		σ^2_2	0.03^{+}	0.02	0.03^{+}	0.06*	0	0	0.01	0
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		2175.4	2465.3	2175.9	2459.2	2093.1	2376.9	2091.6	2380.0
	AIC		2195.4	2485.3	2195.9	2479.2	2111.1	2394.9	2111.6	2398.0
	BIC		2224.1	2514.2	2224.7	2508.1	2136.9	2420.9	2140.3	2424.0

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 5

Aspiration Fulfillment Predicting Well-Being.

			Relationship Aspiration Fulfillment		Work Aspiration Fulfillment	
	Effect	Parameter	Happiness	Positive Affect	Happiness	Positive Affect
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.05	-0.08	0.05	-0.07
	Previous Well-Being	γ_{10}	0.39***	0.29***	0.41***	0.27***
	Fulfillment	γ_{20}	0.21***	0.25***	0.18***	0.19***
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.45***	0.49***	0.46***	0.50***
	Level 2	σ^2_0	0.13**	0.18***	0.11**	0.29***
		σ^2_1	0.02^{+}	0.08***	0.03*	0.07**
		σ^2_2	0.03*	0.04*	0.01	0.009
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		2183.7	2334.0	2170.7	2330.7
	AIC		2203.7	2353.0	2190.7	2350.7
	BIC		2232.6	2382.8	2219.5	2379.5

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 6

Well-Being Predicting Aspiration Fulfillment.

			Happiness		Positive Affect	
	Effect	Parameter	Relationship Fulfillment	Work Fulfillment	Relationship Fulfillment	Work Fulfillment
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.16**	0.10^{+}	0.16**	0.10^{+}
	Previous Fulfillment	γ_{10}	0.17***	0.19***	0.16***	0.20***
	Happiness	γ_{20}	0.01	0.02	--	--
	Positive Affect	γ_{20}	--	--	0.05	0.07^{+}
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.47***	0.60***	0.48***	0.61***
	Level 2	σ^2_{0}	0.24***	0.25***	0.22***	0.23***
		σ^2_{1}	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02
		σ^2_{2}	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		1958.4	2121.3	1955.9	2118.1
	AIC		1978.4	2141.3	1975.9	2138.1
	BIC		2007.4	2170.3	2004.9	2167.1

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 7

Aspiration Height Predicting Aspiration Fulfillment.

			Between-Ps Height		Within-Ps Height	
	Effect	Parameter	Relationship Fulfillment	Work Fulfillment	Relationship Fulfillment	Work Fulfillment
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.15**	0.09	0.15**	0.09^{+}
	Previous Fulfillment	γ_{10}	0.17***	0.21***	0.17***	0.21***
	Between-Ps Height	γ_{20}	-0.06^{+}	-0.03	--	--
	Within-Ps Height	γ_{20}	--	--	-0.05	-0.05
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.46***	0.60***	0.45***	0.59***
	Level 2	σ^2_{0}	0.24***	0.24***	0.23***	0.24***
		σ^2_{1}	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.03^{+}
		σ^2_{2}	0.02^{+}	0.02	0.04*	0.03^{+}
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		1922.6	2088.5	1925.9	2106.3
	AIC		1942.6	2108.5	1945.9	2126.3
	BIC		1971.5	2137.3	1974.9	2155.2

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 8

Aspiration Fulfillment Predicting Aspiration Height.

			Relationship Aspirations		Work Aspirations	
	Effect	Parameter	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height	Between-Ps Height	Within-Ps Height
Fixed Effects	Intercept	γ_{00}	0.22**	0.05	-0.16**	-0.05
	Previous Height	γ_{10}	0.13***	0.14***	0.22***	0.15***
	Fulfillment	γ_{20}	-0.08^{+}	-0.08^{+}	-0.01	-0.04
Random Effects	Level 1	σ^2_{ε}	0.46***	0.68***	0.50***	0.68***
	Level 2	σ^2_0	0.39***	0.25***	0.21***	0.15**
		σ^2_1	0.03*	0.006	0.04*	0.02
		σ^2_2	0.04*	0.07*	0.01	0.05*
Goodness of Fit	Deviance		1910.8	2158.4	1874.6	2117.2
	AIC		1930.8	2178.4	1894.6	2137.3
	BIC		1958.7	2206.6	1922.5	2165.4

Note: $^{+}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

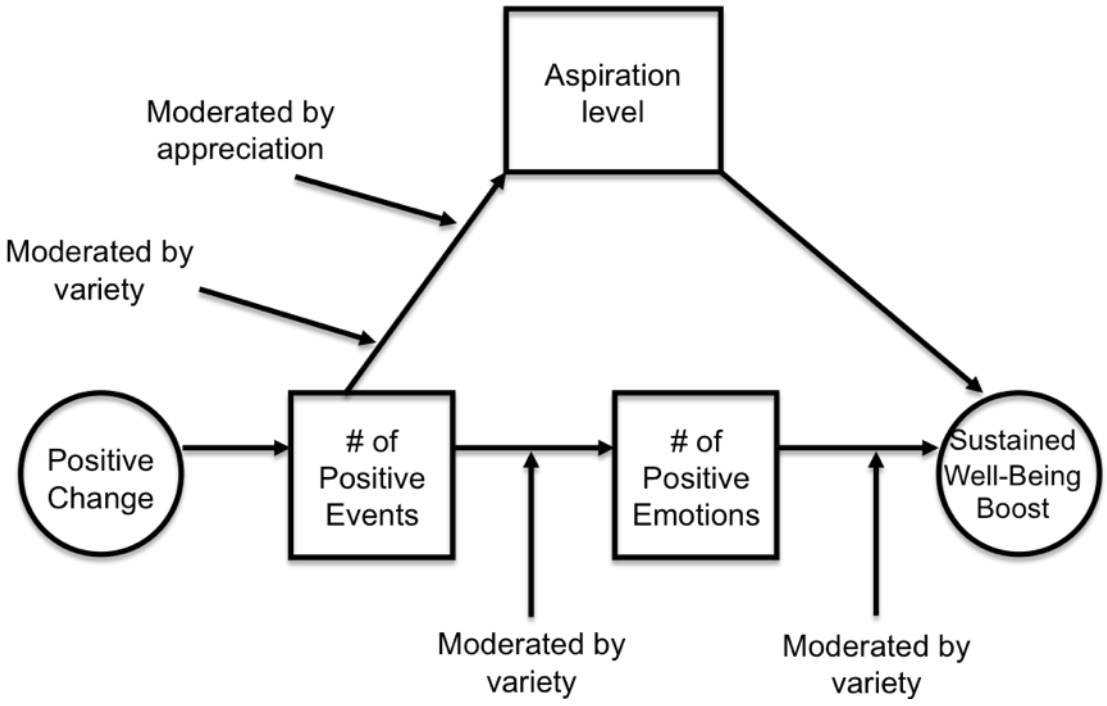

Figure 1. Hedonic Adaptation Prevention Model