Episode 62: Ethan McMahan

**KL:** Katie Linder

**EM:** Ethan McMahan

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode 62.

[*intro music*]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast) to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Ethan McMahan, an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Western Oregon University. His research interests focus on hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being, folk conceptions of happiness, and the relationship between nature and human well-being. His recent work examines how exposure to immersive simulations of natural environments impacts concurrent emotional state and, more broadly, how regular contact with natural environments may be one route by which individuals achieve optimal feeling and functioning. He has published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Personality and Individual Differences*, and *Ecopsychology*, among other publications. He completed his undergraduate training at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and holds a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology from the University of Wyoming.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Ethan.

**EM:** Thank you very much for having me.

**KL:** So, I find your research really interesting because it is focused on happiness, and so I thought we could talk, first, about measuring happiness [*laughs softly*] and some of the things that you’re doing in your research. But let’s start... can you just share a little bit more about the questions you’re exploring? I know your research focuses broadly on happiness, but obviously you’re looking at it in some more specific ways, so what are some of the questions you’re looking at?

**EM:** Yeah. So, I really have kind of two main questions that I’m interested in. The first question concerns how do people conceptualize or define happiness. So the term *happiness*, it’s a pretty ill-defined term, both among my colleagues as well as among lay populations, and so one of the questions that I’m interested in is how do people define happiness, what does happiness mean to them, and then secondarily do these definitions that people have of happiness or their lay theories of happiness, does it impact their actual wellbeing. And so that’s sort of the first question that I’m really interested in. And the second major question that I’m interested in is to what extent does contact with natural environments, as opposed to built and urban environments, to what extent does contact with those environments impact people’s emotional state and happiness and wellbeing, and so on.

**KL:** So, both of these questions, I think, there’s probably a lot of layers to them. I’m curious, are you looking at these things in a range of contexts, like are you looking across cultures, are you looking across different populations? You know, who are the people that you’re really looking at for these questions?

**EM:** Yeah, so, in my research that examines how people conceptualize happiness or how they define happiness, in at least a couple of different projects I’ve looked at different populations, so.... You know, the majority of research in psychology gets conducted with undergraduate students. That’s who we study, but that’s a pretty narrow portion of the population, and so I’ve tried to branch out beyond that, and so in some of my earlier work we looked at how younger adults, like undergraduates and those in their early 20s, how their conceptions of wellbeing or definitions of happiness and wellbeing differ from older adults. And so we had samples of individuals aged 65 years and older, and so we compared their conceptions of wellbeing, because you can probably imagine what your average 20-year-old, what they think happiness is may be very different than what your average 70-, 75-year-old thinks happiness is.

**KL:** Absolutely.

**EM:** So we’ve looked at.... Yeah, yeah. So, we’ve look at that, and then I’ve also done some research with some collaborators over in South Korea, my good Incheol Choi, who’s at Seoul National University, and we compared conceptions of happiness and wellbeing in young adults from the United States and young adults in South Korea, because one of the things that the literature consistently said is that conceptions of happiness, or the nature of what it means to be well, the nature of what it means to be happy, is necessarily culturally-bounded, so different cultures are going to say different things about what it means to be happy, what it means to be well. And so we’ve done some research comparing at least those two cultures to see if that is the case.

**KL:** Yeah, this is something I feel like has been in the news recently. There’s some.... I’m trying to think of exactly where it’s coming out of, I think Scandinavia, where there are some kind of popular books that are coming out of Scandinavia saying, you know, there’s a certain lifestyle that you can live that will make you happier. Or I think about documentaries that show certain cultures as being the happiest cultures. And I would imagine it really changes based on context and relative to, you know, where people are living, and also just the identity categories that they’re inhabiting.

**EM:** Oh, yes, certainly, and it would make sense that much of the literature would come from Scandinavian and northern European countries, because we’ve known for quite a while, large-scale surveys have shown that those folks up there, they enjoy some of the highest quality of life across numerous indicators, so.... And you know, what exactly they’re doing nobody really knows for sure, but whatever. We have a bunch of ideas, but whatever they’re doing, it seems to be working well for them.

**KL:** Mm-hm. Well, we all want to learn more about that. I’m curious what kinds of measures you’re using for happiness. What kind of instrumentation are you using, and are these measures, you know, still in development, or are there kind of more standardized measures and instruments that are pretty well established at this point?

**EM:** Right. So, the majority of measures that I use are pretty well-validated measures that are used consistently in positive psychological research. So I guess one first point I want to make is that usually when researchers in my area, we don’t really use the term *happiness* a whole lot in a technical sense, because it is such a potentially broad and problematic term, and so what we try and do instead is kind of pull out what are some component parts of happiness, or what are some of the characteristics of happiness. One of the things that you might think is that happiness clearly has an emotional component, and so we could measure people’s emotional state, either concurrent emotional state (so how they’re feeling at that moment) or how they typically feel, and so, measure levels of positive emotion, levels of negative emotion, and basically use that as a proxy measure of happiness or an indicator of happiness. And there’s a number of different well-used, well-validated, established measures of positive and negative emotion.

And then some other measures that are used is.... Many researchers believe that having a firm and stable sense of life satisfaction—so, being satisfied with your life, feeling that you’re happy with how things have turned out—that that is related to happiness, and so we have self-report instruments that assess overall satisfaction with life.

And so we use a lot of those. We also use.... I guess, kind of going back to measuring emotional state.... We also use implicit measures of emotion. And so you have your explicit measures of emotion where it’s pretty direct. You ask people to rate how frequently or to what degree they’re experiencing a given emotion at that time, so, you know, how happy, excuse me, how joyful are you feeling on a scale of one to five right now, that type of thing. But those measures.... Sometimes when you ask people things directly, they may be inclined to engage in socially-desirable responding, and so you don’t want them to respond in a socially-desirable way, you want them to respond in the true way, how they’re actually feeling, and so we use other measures that attempt to assess emotional state indirectly, without them being aware that that’s what we’re doing. And so I use some of those implicit measures as well. But, um, yeah. We use a number of different measures, not measure happiness specifically, but kind of what we think are component parts of happiness. That’s typically, that’s the type of stuff that I use.

**KL:** Some of your more recent research is really doing that, where you’re looking at the relationship between happiness and pain or the relationship between happiness and natural environments, and really trying to look at it in relationship to something else. Is there anything that you’re finding from that research that you’ve found to be particularly interesting or surprising to you?

**EM:** Uh, so, which one? So, the happiness in pain or the happiness in nature? Because frankly I find them both quite interesting, but—

**KL:** I think they’re both interesting, too. I was kind of asking more broadly, but let’s start with the happiness in pain, and we’ll move onto the other one too.

**EM:** Sure. Sure. So, with the happiness in pain, so, you know, the interesting thing about positive psych, it’s a relatively new subfield of psychology, and one of the major early criticisms of positive psych was that it was too Pollyanna, that we were focusing on the promotion of these positive states and kind of ignoring the negative, and kind of the underlying thinking was, well, you’re telling people that being positive is always good, feeling good is always good, and feeling bad is always bad. We have, in psychology in the last—or excuse me, in positive psych in the last maybe five, six, seven years or so, there’s been kind of this renewed interest in taking into account these more negative states and how they may play into positive feeling and functioning. One of the questions that I was interested in is, at least culturally in the United States and in other countries, a lot of people when they think of happiness, they think of it as this state where people experience a lot of positive emotion and no negative emotion. So the idea would be to feel good all the time and to not feel bad any of the time.

And so one of the things that I was interested in was, potentially how healthy is it to want to not feel bad all the time? Or more specifically, my research question was, what happens when people conceptualize, think of happiness as a state where it’s completely devoid of any pain and any hardship and that sort of thing. And so we measured people’s definitions of wellbeing, and we measured the degree to which they thought that happiness was this state that was devoid of pain and anguish and that sort of thing. And what we found was, somewhat counter to intuition, was that the more people that believed happiness involved a lack of pain or an absence of pain, typically the worse off they were, particularly during times of stress, during times of hardship for them. Because for those folks, those times of stress, those times of hardship take on added significance, right? So if you believe that happiness is this state that you never feel pain, but yet you’re feeling pain at that moment, for whatever reason, or you’re feeling stressed or you’re feeling depressed, or whatever it is that you’re feeling at that time, that current situation takes on added significance. It indicates that you are not happy, you’re not living well at that time, that you are in a state that is different from how you want to be. And just that discrepancy between the current state of affairs and how you want to be causes added problems, causes added negative emotions, so it kind of starts this negative process where people, they don’t want to feel bad, they do feel bad, and that makes them feels worse. And so it just continues like that. The take-home message was that actually it’s much healthier to have an appreciation of the role of negative emotions and negative experiences in positive feeling and functioning.

**KL:** That’s fascinating. Wow. That’s really, really interesting. What are some of the things that you’re finding with the relationship between happiness and natural environments?

**EM:** Yeah, so this particular area, I just got started doing this research maybe about three years ago, is when I got started working on it in earnest, and for many years there’s been this idea that being in nature is good for the person. You have great thinkers like Thoreau and John Muir who had written extensively about the benefits of being in the natural environment, but it wasn’t really until the last 50 years or so that people started looking at whether or not contact with nature [*inaudible*] wellbeing empirically, so they hadn’t been doing empirical research until the last 50 years. And when you looked at the literature, the empirical literature, what you see is these pretty clear trends that being in contact with natural environments improves people’s health, both their physical health and their psychological health. We see improved emotional state, improved cognitive functioning, improved physical functioning, so generally speaking, being in contact with nature seems to improve people’s functioning across the board. But I became interested in looking at taking a more nuanced approach in looking at what are some person-related factors that may impact how people respond to wellbeing. So, for example, are some people, for whatever reason, more inclined to benefit from contact with nature than are others? And then a second and related question was, is there anything about natural environments that can impact how people respond to them? So are there certain environments that are more beneficial, certain natural environments that are more beneficial than others are? And so, I’ve kind of been approaching those two questions in parallel, so some of my research has looked at how people’s dispositional connectedness to nature, so the degree to which they feel some sort of subjective sense of connection to the natural world, the degree to which that impacts how they respond to nature. As you might expect, people who feel just more connected to the natural world dispositionally, they’re just kind of more nature people than some other folks are, they tend to respond more positively to contact with nature than people who are less connected with nature.

And then we’ve, in looking at characteristics of the environment and how that impacts people’s responses, one of the areas that I kind of within that am particularly interested in, is how human alteration and impact on natural environments, how that impacts people’s responses to those environments. And what we found is that when you show, when you tell people about or show them or put them in contact with natural environments that are relatively pristine, untouched by humans, for example like wilderness areas, that they tend to respond more positively to those natural environments than natural environments that are known to be contacted and impacted frequently by humans, to the extent that they feel better when they’re in the presence of these more pristine and wild environments, but they’re also more likely to support active preservation and conservation of these environments than the human-impacted environments, which I actually think is somewhat ironic, because the human-impacted environments are arguably the natural environments that are most in need of saving, yet people are more willing to support conservation of the more pristine environments.

**KL:** Hmm, that’s really interesting. I’m looking forward to hearing about some of the kind of practical things that are coming out of your research. We’re going to take a little bit of a brief break, and then we’ll come back and hear more from Ethan. Back in a moment.

[*music*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Ethan, I have to say, one of the things I was really curious about when I found out about your research topic was, because you research happiness, do you find yourself in situations where people expect you to be happy, because they think you know the secrets of happiness? I mean is this something that’s expected of you as a happiness researcher?

**EM:** I think most people recognize that just because you study something doesn’t mean that you know everything that you need to know about it or that you’re living it every day of your life. But with that said, one of the common questions I do get, not necessarily from colleagues, but from just non-academic folks, people that I interact with in other aspects of my life is, what’s the secret to being happy? You study happiness, so what’s the secret? And that’s a harder question to answer, a harder situation. I think I invariably end up disappointing them every time they ask that question.

**KL:** Well you won’t get that question from me. However, I am curious to know if there are concrete actions that have come out of your research that you feel are more generalizable, about what it means to be more happy or to be more well. But I’m also just curious, you know, like, if there aren’t generalizable, is it really too contextual to be able to make those claims. So what are some of the things that you’re finding? Are there concrete things that you feel like you can propose across different groups?

**EM:** You know, I think there are several, several things that the research has indicated that tends to make people happier. One of the first things that I would start off with is, you know, if you want to be happier, forget about trying to be happy. It sounds counter to intuition, but what we find is that when people become preoccupied with being happy, with feeling positive emotion most of the time, they tend to set unrealistically high standards for their emotional states, and that then invariably leads to disappointment. The example I use with the students in my classes is, when I was a much younger man, there was this movie that had come out, this comedy movie that was getting a lot of really great reviews and it was supposed to be just fantastic, and this funny, laugh out loud the whole time, and that movie was *Austin Powers: Man of Mystery*. But I remember being super excited to go see that movie, because I had heard so many good things, I had such high expectations, and I go into the movie theater and I watch the movie, and I left the movie theater thinking, like, “I mean, it was okay, but it wasn’t great.” And then two weeks later, or a few months later, I guess it was, I watched the movie again and I thought it was hysterical. The problem was that the first time I’d seen it, my expectations and my standards were so high that it was unreasonable and unrealistic to live up to them. And so I left disappointed. I went into it expecting to feel really good, and I left only feeling marginally good, which you know, which then was disappointing to me.

Um, and happiness operates in much the same way: if you kind of go into life, expecting and wanting to feel good all the time, you’re going to invariably lead to disappointment. So, one of the best things you can do, if you want to be happy, is to not to pursue it actively and not to expect to be happy all the time and just to let it come as a byproduct of meaningful activity.

So that would be, I guess, the first thing that I would say, and then the second thing I would say is that there are a number of different.... So in positive psychology, a number of researchers, well-known researchers, have dedicated themselves to determining, or to examining various types of happiness interventions. And there has been a great deal of literature that’s shown that these happiness interventions are effective, and so one of the happiness interventions is to express gratitude to people, so, make a concerted effort to express gratitude to those who have done something that benefits you. And by doing this, by making a point out of thanking others, then that actually tends to lead to more positive feelings for yourself. Several other things, for example, umm… let’s see, find meaning in whatever it is you do. You hear about people that, they work, or the aspects of their lives that are not terribly exciting, you look at it kind of objectively, you know, this person has this life that’s not terribly exciting but somehow they find meaning in it, and as a result they tend to be a lot happier. But there’s certainly a lot of things that you can do to at least feel better some, if not most, of the time.

**KL:** Those are great tricks. I’m curious if you have ideas that.... What are things that might make researchers more happy? And clearly this is not a population you have researched, so I’m not asking for, you know, we can cite a study in our show notes that talks about researchers and what makes them happier, we won’t be able to do that. But I am curious, Ethan, just based on your experience, and your own experience as a researcher as well, of this topic but also just being a researcher and having that identity, if there are things that you think are specifically applicable to people who are kind of living the life of the mind and, you know, who are engaging in the kinds of things researchers are engaging in. Curiosity, answering questions, exploring ideas, you know. Are there certain things that you think are applicable to that group, that will help make them happier?

**EM:** Yeah, you know, I don’t know how easy it will be to solve this particular problem. But I can say that at least in psychology and I would assume in many other disciplines—I think they’re actually a lot of things about the research enterprise that actually undermine happiness. It seems like, at least in recent years, that research has become more outcome-focused, so you get a lot of academic researchers that become preoccupied with getting publications, and giving presentations, getting grant money, so we’re very outcome-oriented at this point. And, you know, the benefit of that is that we’ve made progress in a lot of areas, but one of the things that concerns me is that all of those things that we’re so focused on [*missing audio*] where you’re being motivated to get yet another publication or to get yet another grant, but you’re not motivated by that underlying curiosity, or at least there’s a possibility that the focus on the publication and the grants undermines your curiosity here. So I think in an idealistic world we tend to think of researchers as people that are passionately engaged in the discovery of knowledge and that they’re motivated by this curiosity and this fascination about whatever it is their chosen topic is. You would hope that that would be the case, and certainly for most folks, to some degree that is the case, but then you put them in a situation where you’re focused on producing, and you have to produce to maintain, to keep your job, or to advance in your job, and so I would think that many researchers would probably be a lot happier if we were working within a system where we could really, truly indulge our passion, indulge our curiosity with less concern about whether or not it’s going to lead to publication or whether or not it’s going to lead to getting additional grants. And I think if we could do that we would enjoy our work more, and of course because our work is, for most researchers, their work is such a big part of their life in general, if you feel more positive about that big area of your life, that big component of your life, then that positivity, that happiness, that satisfaction would then bleed over, carry over into other parts of your life. That’s kind of the big thing that I would say, is—and actually there is a fair amount of research to indicate that when people are motivated by intrinsic factors, so, things that they find enjoyable in their own right, like the discovery of knowledge and indulging this fascination and creativity, that tends to lead to more positive psychological health-related outcomes. But when people are motivated by extrinsic factors, again, such as these outcomes that I’ve been referring to, then that tends to lead to more problematic outcomes.

**KL:** Mm-hm. That’s really interesting. I mean, it seems to me, this idea of pressure to publish or to do grants or other kinds of things, the outcomes focus model that you’re talking about, it seems to me that’s directly related, also, to kind of levels of stress, and thinking about pressure that people might be putting on themselves, or whether it’s coming from an external source or from their own internal motivation to try to keep a job or whatever. So I’m curious if there is also kind of relationships, or if you’re looking at this at all, if it’s involved in your research or you’re just aware of the other literature about the relationship between stress and happiness, and in particular, I wonder, would stress always affect happiness in kind of a negative way? Anyway, I’m just kind of curious. What are your thoughts or your awareness of the relationship between stress and happiness? Because it seems like that could certainly come into this equation.

**EM:** Yeah. I think there’s a complicated relationship between stress and happiness. On one hand, most folks would consider them to be diametrically opposed to one another, so if you’re feeling stress, clearly you’re not feeling good, and so that’s the opposite of happiness, but I don’t necessarily view it that way. Certainly experiencing high levels of stress for extended periods of time, or even feeling just low levels of stress but for an extended period of time, clearly that’s bad for you. You don’t feel well. It also stresses you physiologically such that you have more health problems. It interferes with immune system functioning, with cardiovascular functioning, and so on. And so stress in that sense can be very, very bad for you. And at least related to the topic we were addressing in the previous question, you know, you take researchers or really just any individual and put them in a work environment where they’re feeling constant pressure, or they’re feeling pressure over the long term, you know, that’s not going to be good for them, psychologically or physiologically.

So from that perspective, stress is clearly not good for you, but on the other hand, you could argue that the experience of stress, feeling stressed-out, is functional, in the sense that if you feel stressed, it means that something’s not right in your life. And you don’t want to feel stressed, and so typically what happens is that that motivates you to change things, right? So if stress didn’t feel bad, then nobody would be motivated to change things. But a little bit of stress, a little bit of anxiety every once in a while, not feeling good, that can then prompt behaviors that actually lead to more adaptive functioning, to lead to higher levels of well-being. And so if you feel stress every once in a while, and if you are effectively coping with that stress, you know, engaging in behaviors to either deal with the situation directly or to change how you think about the situation, that that can actually prompt adaptive, even resilient behavior at times.

**KL:** I love the complexity of all this. I think you’ve done such a good job of kind of outlining the different layers and questions and things that you’re thinking about in this area of research. Ethan, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and share a little bit about your work and how you’re asking these questions around happiness and wellbeing.

**EM:** Well thank you very much for having me. I really enjoyed being on your podcast.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with another episode.

[*outro music*]

Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found on the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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# Bonus Clip:

[*intro music*]

**KL:** In this bonus clip for Episode 62 of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Ethan McMahan shares about how he got started with happiness research—take a listen.

Ethan, I’m really curious to learn a little bit about what led you to researching in this area. It definitely is interesting. You’ve explained all these different kinds of levels and details about the different things you’re looking at, but can you share a little bit about what kind of brought you to this place where you were asking these questions and looking at happiness in these ways?

**EM:** Yeah. Yeah, certainly. It was unexpected, it was unplanned. So what happened was when I was an undergrad at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, actually I wasn’t studying happiness. I was interested more in cognitive development and specifically cognitive aging, looking at how memory functioning changed over the lifespan. When I was applying to graduate school, one of the schools that I was looking at, one of the people I was looking at working with, was up at the University of Wyoming. It was my, you know, later to be my advisor, my mentor, David Estes. As far as I knew at the time, he had done a lot of research in cognitive development and metacognitive development, and so it seemed like a decent fit. And so I got an interview up at the University of Wyoming, and I did my homework, and I read all of his previous research and looked at the context for the research, and really kind of got this strong background in what he’d done previously, because I wanted to make a good impression at the meeting, at my interview with him. And so I go into the interview and I just kind of dive into, well, I’ve read this and this and this about your work, and I think these ideas are really cool, and your work in this area I found particularly interesting, and probably talked for about five, ten minutes straight, and he just let me talk the whole time. And so I’m going and going and going and going, and then I finish with my little spiel there, and he kind of very quietly, he looks at me, and he says, “Well, that’s great, but I don’t really do that anymore.”

**KL:** [*laughs*]

**EM:** And so my [*laughs*], my jaw just kind of drops, and I’m like, “Oh, okay,” inside. And so I said, “Well, what is it that you do now, then?” And he said, “Well, I’ve become interested in what I call optimal development, which is positive functioning from a developmental perspective, so, looking at wellbeing across the lifespan.” And I said, “Okay, well, can you tell me more about that?” And so he explained it to me. And the reason I didn’t know that that’s what he was studying is because he’d just made that transition. He had decided to stop doing research in cognitive development and focus on this optimal development, but he hadn’t been doing it for very long, so he didn’t have any published work, and so I wouldn’t have come across it, and I had no idea. But what he was describing to me, what he was interested in, I found that really, really interesting. And I had some familiarity with it, based on my undergraduate training, and so, you know, when he told me that that’s what he was interested in, I said, “To be quite honest, I don’t have a whole lot of experience with that sort of thing, but it’s very interesting to me, and I would be happy to pursue it with you.” And I guess he found that convincing enough to take me on, and so that kind of started my graduate training in studying wellbeing and happiness from a developmental perspective.

**KL:** That’s so fascinating. Like, it sounds so serendipitous. Like, you had no way of knowing that that could be an area that he was focused on, and then you get there, and it kind of is just put in your lap a little bit, unexpectedly.

**EM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, and you’ve got to think about how excited that might get a young scholar, because at that point, when he was offering me the ability to work in his lab, and they were offering me the position there at the graduate school, you know, essentially my job was to study happiness, and just on the surface I just liked the sound of that. You know, it’s like, “What do you do?” “I study happiness.”

**KL:** Mm-hm.

**EM:** And that sounded really good to me. And so I guess I just kind of lucked into it, and it’s worked out well for me.

**KL:** Well, of all the things you could luck into, studying happiness seems like it’s, you know, very aligned with that. Thanks so much for sharing the story of how you got started, Ethan.

[*outro music*]

You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 62 of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Ethan McMahan sharing about how he got started with happiness research—thanks for listening!