

From self to structure: challenging the 'happiness industry'

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'The cure for unhappiness is happiness. I don't care what anybody says.' Elizabeth McCracken (2005)

'Happiness is easy.' Mark Hollis (1986)

Despite the words of Mark Hollis, happiness doesn't appear to be easy. Indeed, we are living in an age where achieving a mental state of happiness is not easy at all, if you choose to believe the voices of doom and gloom. In fact, it's a source of great concern and anxiety for most people where states of unhappiness are deemed to be the norm; 'modern life is rubbish' as Blur put it so well. The zeitgeist appears to be one of melancholy, despair, alienation – we are increasingly cogs in late-capitalist machines. But there is a way out. You read. And you read. And then you read some more. From even a casual glance at amazon.co.uk or your nearest High Street bookshop you can tell that the subject of happiness is 'in'. Stuart Jeffries, interviewing the largely humourless psychoanalyst Adam Phillips for *The Guardian* in July (2006), manages – with some ease – to list five books that all came out this year and that, in different ways, attempt to argue the same thing: read this book and it will change your life – happiness is this way, follow the white rabbit... Daniel Gilbert maintains that we are all *Stumbling on happiness* (Gilbert, 2006), Jonathan Haidt argues that it's all about unlocking *The happiness hypothesis* (Haidt, 2006), Richard Schoch informs us that we need to discover *The secrets of happiness* (Schoch, 2006), Darrin McMahon suggests that it's all about *The pursuit of happiness* (McMahon, 2006), and the economist Richard Layard notes that *Happiness: lessons from a new science* (Layard, 2006) can teach us the vital lesson that 'richer' does not equate to 'happier'. You read. You think. You pay your way to happiness.

As I have read my way through the recent spate of popular literature, as well as some of the research evidence from across a range of academic disciplines, it is clear that something is missing. That 'thing' is what sociologists usually refer to as 'structure'. The obsession of current debates is clearly focused on what psychologists refer to as 'self'. My argument, in simple terms, is that the 'happiness and well being' debate has been hijacked (even framed) by neo-liberal and market interests. It is evident that the 'solutions' to unhappiness (however tenuously this might be defined) tend to be corporate and consumerist in nature and such measures are aimed purely at the *individual* – completely ignoring wider *structural/collective* dynamics within broader socially and economically divided society. As it currently plays out, all suggested cures to unhappiness are merely badly placed sticking plasters over the dynamics of late capitalism, that fail to even cover the wounds. Unhappiness is structural and embedded within capitalist systems – it is as central to the system as surplus value. Consumption is presented as the way out of this melancholy, whether this be via books, pills or therapy – the more you spend, the happier you might be.

So, the main questions here are threefold: how do we tend to define and understand 'happiness' (or, rather, what is called 'subjective well being' in certain disciplines); how to critically unpick the 'industry and business' of happiness; and how to situate these concerns within the contemporary debates we are witnessing in Scotland, especially centred around the 'confidence and well-being' agenda and the Scottish Executive drive (and money being spent) in this area?

With regards to defining and understanding happiness it is interesting to note just how rich an area this is for producing memorable quotes across different areas of popular culture. What is even more interesting is the way that popular culture seems to mirror and reflect

academic engagement with the question of happiness and its achievement. They range from the humorous, to the thoughtful, to the downright bizarre. Spike Milligan famously quipped that 'Money can't buy you happiness but it does bring you a more pleasant form of misery'. This, of course, taps into current economic debates, best illustrated by Richard Layard's work (2006), that argues a similar line of thought that a supposedly higher standard of living does not necessarily produce higher states of happiness in and of itself. Perhaps more philosophically, Allan K Chalmers noted that 'The grand essentials of happiness are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.' In this quote, Chalmers steps into the same psychological and philosophical terrain as some of the authors noted above, especially Jonathan Haidt (2006) who is something of a leading light in that questionable 'positive psychology' tradition. It's all about 'identity' and 'motivators' that spur us on – to be unhappy is to be 'stationary' in life, to have nothing to aspire to, to have no status or ambition. In other words, under neo-liberal conditions, achieving happiness becomes the pursuit of a kind of personal work/play entrepreneurialism, in the widest meaning of that word. Then we have the bizarre – a memorable headline from *The Daily Record* (1999) indicated that 'Happiness is the smell of Granny, but the whiff of a young man can make you depressed.' There is not much more that you can add to this except to say that the source for this wonderful headline was of course an academic study into smells and states of mind – 'teenage boy smells' being the ones to stay clear of if you are to avoid depression and unhappiness whilst the smell of Granny takes you back to the comfort of youth giving you a sense of security and belonging (Chen and Haviland-Jones, 1999).

Not that I'd wish to disagree with John Lennon, but clearly happiness is more than a warm gun. So how do we get to this mythical summit of true happiness? Do we even know it when we arrive there? Can it be *felt* and *experienced* in the here and now? Is happiness best found not in the moment but by looking back? Do we *reflect* on happiness? Is it, by definition, nostalgic? Or is happiness best captured in the future – is it about having something to look forward to, something that 'motivates' us and 'drives' us forward, keeping us from going under? Does happiness have a 'baseline'? To what extent does national culture, age, gender, neuroscience impact on the levels of happiness you can experience? The questions are many – this is an area of academic inquiry that raises many more questions than it can ever hope to answer, despite having its own journal to tease out answers to these questions (the *Journal of Happiness Studies* is published by Springer in the Netherlands).

From all the research I have reviewed in the last few months there appear to be some constants. There seems to be several indicators that 'work' in keeping us happy, or at least content. A wide range of active social networks, deep and meaningful personal relationships and a close family are all cited as instrumental in keeping us connected to each other and ourselves (Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, 1999). But these elements are all then taken to the base root of the *individual*: networks, relationships and family are seen as an instrumental means to an end (the end being individual 'inner peace' and feelings of having a 'contented life' etc.). In other words, all structure is stripped away and regarded as elements that help us, as isolated particles, to find our own way to happiness via a map that only we can follow as individuals. It is a one-person path, ultimately. Most of the books cited above also suggest that having a (paid or unpaid) job, maintaining good health and 'performing roles, achieving

goals' are key features to being happy. Again, *motivation* appears to be key here – having a feeling that life is not something 'passing us by' but rather we are connected to and have a stake in. But, if true, what happens to those people who feel they have no stake or connection with wider society? In policy terms, those deemed to be 'socially excluded'? Essentially, thinking about Chalmers words above, this is largely about 'purpose' and the sense that via learning, leisure, religion – whatever fetish that might get you up in the morning – we need to have a purpose and a 'mission', if you like. We are here for a reason – we are not just 'a virus with shoes' as Bill Hicks famously put it.

It's been suggested, by Layard (2006) and other commentators, that the equation 'money equals happiness' is without foundation and fails to add up. For the majority of us, perhaps, we might welcome the opportunity to test out this equation for ourselves. But evidence seems to indicate that as a population in Britain we are getting richer in terms of Gross Domestic Product yet we are not any happier for this. Why is this the case? One reason appears to be rooted in what has been termed the 'Hedonic treadmill' (Michael Eysenck in Wade, 2005) – we can compare the pursuit of happiness to a person running on a treadmill whereby we need to keep working just to stay in the same place. The (psychological) theory here is that people tend to react and adapt quickly to 'good things' in life by eventually taking them for granted. This is hardly a great revelation but, for example, the more consumer durables we have in our homes and the more medals we pin to our chests, the more we need to boost our levels of happiness to sustain the same levels of satisfaction we derive from those possessions and achievements. Evolution, it's suggested by evolutionary biologists, leads us to strive for 'continual betterment'. A good example here is the research conducted by Gardener and Oswald (2006). This research examined the nature of lottery wins and it demonstrated perfectly that money does not appear to add much to happiness. In tests specifically designed to measure happiness, it was found that winners, within a year of their lucky strike, usually returned to their former levels of happiness. Recent suggestions have been made that governments should not measure GDP (Gross Domestic Product) but something called GDH (Gross Domestic Happiness) (Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, 1999). Work proceeds on a happiness index/audit but agreeing on the units of measurement, amongst many other variables and issues, seems to be a major sticking point. What variables are included and excluded? Although a lot of the economics on happiness is being developed and pushed forward in the USA, in May 2006, David Cameron stepped into this debate in Britain and offered his ideas on 'making people happier', suggesting that a 'modern vision of ethical work' and accounting for 'General Well-Being' (rather than just GDP) was essential in modern Britain, with future government policies being judged by how much happiness they produced and delivered rather than just standard cost/benefit analyses (BBC News, 2006).

And what about unhappiness? The British Household Panel Survey tends to bear out the statement made by Oswald and Powdthavee (2006) that when plotted 'Happiness is smile shaped': that recorded levels of average life satisfaction 'dips' during your 30s and 40s. Seemingly just being this age is a major source of unhappiness, whether you have pets, a 'purpose' or good social networks. Unhappiness also has real health impacts, as noted by Blanchflower and Bell (2004). Being unhappy kills you and will easily subtract nine years from your Average Life Expectancy. Of course, the

obvious question mark on this is how is unhappiness measured and recorded? What variables are used in such studies? How are they inter-related? Key trigger moments seem to matter most for researchers on unhappiness: it's the loss of a spouse or losing your paid employment that begins a downward spiral into unhappiness and depression. From this, and other life events, isolation, fear and anxiety take you to the very bottom of the smile.

The situation in Scotland, in material terms, fits in with the way the agenda has been set by the economists and psychologists. Evidence from a recent study (by Blanchflower and Bell, 2004) illustrates clearly that Scotland's economic and health status renders us much more likely to be unhappy. In simple terms, unemployment equals unhappiness and this unhappiness, whether caused by unemployment or other connected factors, leads Scots to have very high suicide rates (especially amongst young men, as shown by Christie, 2001) and anti-depressant use (especially amongst women, as shown by NHS, 2006) when compared to other parts of the UK. Although Richard Holloway has boldly argued that the arts are a potential cure for all this unhappiness (bear in mind he is currently Chair of the Scottish Arts Council) it is difficult to see how cultural pursuits such as subsidised opera might deal with suicides and depression (Holloway, 2005).

With regards to Scotland and its state of happiness and unhappiness the agenda has been set out clearly in the last couple of years and it's been dominated by populist, pseudo-psychological thinking that has led to the reification of both Scotland and Scots. As a nation, and as individuals, we are, it seems, suffering from 'a crisis of confidence' (Craig, 2003). We talk ourselves down, we are too hard on ourselves. We criticise success and people rising 'above their station'. And, importantly for Craig, we are not all venture capitalists or members of the petit-bourgeoisie. Herewith we have seen the birth of a new 'industry' – not an industry of poverty but an industry of happiness and 'well-being'. Despite the shouting from the roof tops I would argue that 'positive psychology' has its limits and that being labelled as 'dour', 'pessimistic' and 'lacking self-worth' (all expressions taken from Craig's book) is not a helpful way forward in tackling serious social and economic disadvantage. It strikes me, in part, as being the latest reincarnation of Charles Murray's 'Underclass' thesis (Murray, 1990) and the neo-liberal agenda for 'blaming the victim' for their own (as is seen) 'impoverished' position and status in life (that is, their unhappiness in this context). And the solutions to such unhappiness lie with money – as Furedi (1993) has pointed out, the therapy, drugs and self-help culture has given rise to a global corporate business. Solutions do not seem to be pitched at the community or political level – it's all about the personal, the individual, the 'self'.

It is worth bearing in mind Jeremy Bentham's words – leaning on Joseph Priestly's writings – about 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. At a deep level, and to slightly mix up my leading thinkers, this is a phrase that reminds us that unhappiness is a Beveridge type 'giant' that demands a solution rising above the personal and the individual. It is a 'giant' best tackled at the community, collective level that aims to tackle the structural problems we have in our society caused by neo-liberal economics and a capitalist system that has lost all sight of where the brakes might be – all the worse when one looks at the environmental meltdown we are currently staring in the face. When it comes to happiness and unhappiness we need to be far less self-indulgent than we usually are – we need to care far less about 'self' and much more about structure and challenging an ideology, such as neo-liberalism, that aims to construct boundaries of 'self' around everything we say, do and think. We need to recognise that although there is money to be made in unhappiness, that money is much better spent trying to make good the crass and destructive levels of inequalities in our society. On the question of the choices we face, Polly Toynbee, perhaps surprisingly, puts it usefully:

'Well being depends on co-operation and the public good – not personal enrichment.' (Toynbee, 2003)

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