

Social Policy Implications of the New Happiness Research

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In response to the question: 'What is today's most under-reported story?'

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In the last ten years, psychology has finally started to deliver the goods — hard facts about what causes human happiness. The results have been astonishing, but their social implications have not sparked any serious public debate:

(1) Almost all humans are surprisingly happy almost all the time. 90% of Americans report themselves to be "very happy" or "fairly happy". Also, almost everyone thinks that they are happier than the average person. To a first approximation, almost everyone is near the maximum on the happiness dimension, and this has been true throughout history as far back as we have reliable records. (This may be because our ancestors preferred happy people as sexual partners, driving happiness upwards in both sexes through sexual selection).

(2) Individuals still differ somewhat in their happiness, but these differences are surprisingly stable across the lifespan, and are largely the result of heritable genetic differences (as shown by David Lykken's and Auke Tellegen's studies of identical twins reared apart.)

(3) Major life events that we would expect to affect happiness over the long term (e.g. winning the lottery, death of a spouse) usually only affect it for six months to a year. Each person appears to hover around a happiness "set-point" that is very resistant to change.

(4) The "usual suspects" in explaining individual differences in happiness have almost no effect. A person's age, sex, race, income, geographic location, nationality, and education level have only trivial correlations with happiness, typically explaining less than 2% of the variance. An important exception is that hungry, diseased, oppressed people in developing nations tend to be slightly less happy — but once they reach a certain minimum standard of calorie intake and physical security, further increases in material affluence do not increase their happiness very much.

(5) For those who suffer from very low levels of subjective well-being (e.g. major depression), the most potent anti-depressants are pharmaceutical, not social or economic. Six months on Prozac™, Wellbutrin™, Serzone™, or Effexor™ will usually put a depressed person back near a normal happiness set-point (apparently by increasing serotonin's effects in the left prefrontal cortex). The effects of such drugs are usually stronger than any increase in wealth or status, or any other attempt to change the external conditions of life.

The dramatic, counter-intuitive results of happiness research have received a fair amount of media attention. The leading researchers, such as Ed Diener, David Myers, David Lykken, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Norbert Schwarz, and Daniel Kahneman, are regularly interviewed in the popular press.

Yet the message has influenced mostly the self-help genre of popular psychology books (which is odd, given that the whole concept of self-help depends on ignoring the heritability and stability of the happiness set-point). The research has not produced the social, economic, and political revolution that one might have expected. Journalists have not had the guts to rock our ideological boats by asking serious questions about the broader social implications of the research.

Popular culture is dominated by advertisements that offer the following promise: buy our good or service, and your subjective well-being will increase. The happiness research demonstrates that most such promises are empty. Perhaps all advertisements for non-essential goods should be required to carry the warning: "Caution: scientific research demonstrates that this product will increase your subjective well-being only in the short term, if at all, and will not increase your happiness set-point".

Of course, luxury goods may work very well to signal our wealth and taste to potential sexual partners and social rivals, through the principles of conspicuous consumption that Thorstein Veblen identified. However, the happiness research shows that increases in numbers of sexual partners and social status do not boost overall long-term happiness. There are good evolutionary reasons why we pursue sex and status, but those pursuits are apparently neither causes nor consequences of our happiness level.

Some journalists may have realized that the happiness research challenges the consumerist dream-world upon which their advertising revenues depend — their failure to report on the implications of the research for consumerism is probably no accident. They are in the business of selling readers to advertisers, not telling readers that advertising is irrelevant to their subjective well-being.

Also, if we take the happiness research seriously, most of the standard rationales for economic growth, technological progress, and improved social policy simply evaporate. In economics for example, people are modelled as agents who try to maximize their "subjective expected utility". At the scientific level, this assumption is very useful in understanding consumer behavior and markets. But at the ideological level of political economy, the happiness literature shows that "utility" cannot be equated with happiness. That is, people may act as if they are trying to increase their happiness by buying products, but they are not actually achieving that aim.

Moreover, increasing GNP per capita, which is a major goal of most governments in the world, will not have any of the promised effects on subjective well-being, once a certain minimum standard of living is in place. None of the standard "social indicators" of economic, political, and social progress are very good at tracking human happiness.

When hot-headed socialists were making this claim 150 years ago, it could be dismissed as contentious rhetoric. Equally, claims by the rich that "money doesn't buy happiness" could be laughed off as self-serving nonsense that perpetuated the oppression of the poor by creating a sort of envy-free pseudo-contentment. But modern science shows both were right: affluence produces rapidly diminishing returns on happiness.

This in turn has a stark and uncomfortable message for those of us in the developed world who wallow in material luxuries: every hundred dollars that we spend on ourselves will have no detectable effect on our happiness; but the same money, if given to hungry, ill, oppressed developing-world people, would dramatically increase their happiness. In other words, effective charity donations have a powerful hedonic rationale (if one takes an objective view of the world),

whereas runaway consumerism does not. Tor Norretranders (in this Edge Forum) has pointed out that 50 billion dollars a year — one dollar a week from each first world person — could end world hunger, helping each of the 6 billion people in the world to reach their happiness set-point.

The utilitarian argument for the rich giving more of their money to the poor is now scientifically irrefutable, but few journalists have recognized that revolutionary implication. (Of course, equally modest contributions to the welfare of other animals capable of subjective experience would also have a dramatic positive effect on overall mammalian, avian, and reptilian happiness.)

Other contributors to this Edge Forum have also alluded to the social implications of happiness research. David Myers pointed out the lack of correlation between wealth and happiness: "it's not the economy, stupid". Douglas Rushkoff and Denise Caruso bemoaned America's descent into mindless, impulsive consumerism and media addiction, neither of which deliver the promised hedonic pay-offs. Daniel Goleman identified the hidden social effects of our daily consumption habits — they not only fail to make us happier, but they impose high environmental costs on everyone else.

Others have suggested that some external substitute for consumerism might be more hedonically effective. David Pink championed a switch from accumulating money to searching for meaning. John Horgan was excited about the quiet proliferation of better psychedelic drugs. Howard Rheingold thinks more electronic democracy will help. They may be right that spiritualism, LSD, and online voting will increase our happiness, but the scientific evidence makes me skeptical. If these advances don't change our genes or our serotonin levels in left prefrontal cortex, I doubt they'll make us happier. There may be other rationales for these improvements in the quality of life, but, ironically, our subjective quality of life is not one of them.

Perhaps the most important implication of the happiness literature concerns population policy.

For a naïve utilitarian like me who believes in the greatest happiness for the greatest number, the happiness research makes everything much simpler. To a first approximation, every human is pretty happy. From an extra-terrestrial utilitarian's viewpoint, human happiness could be treated as a constant. It drops out of the utilitarian equation. That leaves just one variable: the total human population size. The major way to maximize aggregate human happiness is simply to maximize the number of humans who have the privilege of living, before our species goes extinct.

Obviously, there may be some trade-offs between current population size and long-term population sustainability. However, most of the sustainability damage is due not to our large populations per se, but to runaway consumerism in North America and Europe, and catastrophic environmental policies everywhere else. Peter Schwartz (in this Edge Forum) mentioned the declining growth rate of the world's population as if it were unreported good news. I take a different view: the good news for a utilitarian who appreciates the happiness research would be a reduction in America's pointless resource-wastage and Brazil's deforestation rate, accompanied by a luxuriantly fertile boom in world population.

Given modest technological advances, I see no reason why our planet could not sustain a population of 20 billion people for several hundred thousand generations. This would result in a utilitarian aggregate of 10 quadrillion happy people during the life-span of our species — not bad for such a weird, self-deluded sort of primate.

