

THE GREATEST GIFT? HAPPINESS, GOVERNANCE AND PSYCHOLOGY
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ABSTRACT

Both in the UK and internationally, governments are setting out to measure wellbeing, life satisfaction and happiness. Whilst this might seem to offer opportunities for psychology, their chosen method – self-report questionnaires – is problematic. Happiness questionnaires are troubled by problems of definition, introspection, memory and insight; their population-level summation is grossly inaccurate as a representation of everyday emotional experience; and both their reliability and their validity might be better accounted for as products of their ability to model, rather than to measure, psychological processes. Psychology therefore runs the risk of discrediting itself if it becomes too closely associated with these initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

“Ain't got no place to lay your head
Somebody came and took your bed
Don't worry, be happy”

Bobby McFerrin 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' (1988)

Happiness, wellbeing, and satisfaction with life are self-evidently good things. The extent of their contemporary valorisation in Western culture is nevertheless historically distinctive, and we might reasonably question a culture that works so hard, so often, to persuade its members that they are both pre-eminently desirable and readily attainable. This paper has the related but more limited goal of interrogating the methods associated with current government plans to measure happiness, showing that they are flawed, and warning psychologists against aligning themselves too closely with this project. Before proceeding, this necessarily requires a brief consideration of relevant definitions. Paul Allin of the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) observes that, although they are not absolutely identical and some disciplines draw distinctions between them, “the terms wellbeing, quality of life, happiness, life satisfaction and welfare are often used interchangeably” (Allin 2007, p.46). So for reasons of brevity, except where the context demands further specification this paper will simply refer to happiness.

Happiness has recently emerged as a significant aspect of UK government policy. Under the 1997-2010 Labour government, Lord Layard's (2006) work on happiness led to the creation of the 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapies' (IAPT) program: Layard was an adviser to the Blair administration, and known informally as the 'Happiness Tsar'. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in 2010 is currently implementing cuts to health, education, welfare and benefits that are, in the words of Environment Minister Greg Barker, “on a scale that Margaret Thatcher in the 1980's [p.841] could only have dreamt of” (Peev, 2011). Yet this same government is simultaneously investing at least £2million (BBC, 2010) in the creation of a new national index of happiness, life satisfaction and wellbeing.

This substantial investment at a time of widespread ‘austerity’ appears even more remarkable given that robust, ecologically valid indices of happiness’s inverse states, clinical misery and distress, are readily available (in records of psychiatric consultations, anti-depressant prescriptions, IAPT referrals etc.). It is sometimes argued that separate measures of happiness are nevertheless necessary because positive and negative affect are distinct, separate experiences. However, although there is evidence for this, their presumed separation may be less definitive than is sometimes supposed (Ryff, 1989) and is largely inferred from self-report measures (the significance of which will become clear later). Positive and negative affect might not lie on a single continuum, but both clinical and experiential evidence suggest that neither are they wholly discrete experiences that frequently co-occur: someone with a diagnosis of major depression, for example, has by definition experienced a recent deficit of positive affect (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Clearly, then, happiness is highly significant for this government, as it was for the previous one. But historically, it remains a relatively unusual goal of policy. Past governments have been more interested in income, equality, life expectancy, health and illness, housing, education and social care. By comparison, happiness is a singular and peculiar goal, significantly more abstract, amorphous and intangible. It has a marked subjective dimension and so is more psychological and, arguably, more individualised. Its contemporary prominence might be seen as a manifestation of a therapeutic culture (Furedi, 2004), or as illustrating the Foucauldian thesis that the ‘psy’ disciplines are both contingent upon, and enactive of, contemporary Western governance (Foucault, 1977). Modern government is highly dependent upon measurement, and one way psychology contributes is by making (aspects of) experience measurable and calculable (Rose, 1985). Documents from the ONS assert that government needs to measure happiness in order to avoid paternalistic assumptions that it knows what is best for people (Waldron, 2010), and to monitor progress, inform policy design, and contribute to policy appraisal (Dolan, Layard, & Metcalfe, 2011).

Whilst the push to take happiness as a goal of policy comes from various sources, in psychology it gains credibility from its association with positive psychology - a USA-based initiative led by Martin Seligman and concerned with ‘positive’ emotions, individual traits and institutions. Although this paper cannot engage substantially with positive psychology its relevance must be noted, as must the many critiques that have emerged in its relatively short life. In addition to the obvious difficulty of defining certain emotions, traits or institutions as ‘positive’ in a context-free manner, commentators have observed that positive psychology depends upon particular American traditions, and this dependence undermines its claims to universality and objectivity. Ehrenreich (2009) identifies influences including Christianity (both Calvinism and the ‘new thought’ reactions against it) and practices of motivational speaking closely associated with corporate management, whilst Yen (2010) describes how positive psychology selectively invokes history to perform ‘boundary work’ that bolsters its status. Yen also describes how positive psychology has benefitted from inordinate material resources and self-consciously constructed itself as a ‘movement’; Ehrenreich observes that it has even used marketing consultants. Becker & Marecek (2008) show how positive psychology invokes a culturally specific notion of the bounded, autonomous self, and promulgates the ‘American Dream’ that wealth and success are equally available to everyone, arising (in this instance) as effects of

learned [p.842] strategies of affective self-management. They also note that positive psychology has a highly selective view of ‘positive’ institutions, and that it largely ignores the classed, gendered and racialised power relations that structure Western societies. Held (2005) observes that it promulgates a ‘double epistemic standard’, professing to be value neutral and empirically driven yet consistently biased toward optimistic positions, and other commentators make related points (e.g. Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Slife & Richardson, 2008). Responding to such concerns, Seligman is currently attempting to refocus positive psychology away from happiness and onto the notion of ‘flourishing’; whether this will satisfy critics remains to be seen.

However, despite longstanding attempts by some psychologists (e.g. Diener, 2000) to promote national measurements of happiness (work which has subsequently been co-opted by positive psychology) the primary impetus behind the happiness agenda comes from economics, not psychology. Layard and other influential figures (Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen) are economists, and governmental interest in happiness – in the UK, and internationally – is driven by economists’ debates about the shortcomings of indices of wealth, such as gross domestic product (GDP), as indicators of national progress (Chiripanhura, 2010; Thomas & Evans, 2010). And indeed, compared to a narrow focus on purely economic indicators, proposals to promote and assess happiness do seemingly herald a refreshing change. Contemporary Western societies are dominated by the profit motive, saturated with imperatives to consume, deploy much higher proportions of the labour force in service rather than manufacturing industries, are often strikingly unequal, and increasingly recognise the need for economic growth to be sustainable (Oswald, 2010; Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). In this context, the possibility of detailing the lived qualities of everyday experience so that “people’s thoughts and feelings are placed at the centre of policy” (Waldron 2010, p.7) is undeniably attractive.

Unfortunately, however, government proposals to assess happiness ubiquitously depend upon large surveys containing self-report questions such as “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays” or “Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?” (BBC, 2011). For this and other reasons there are enduring and complex difficulties associated with this enterprise, and dangers for psychology if it aligns itself too closely with any such project. This paper will outline some of these difficulties, starting with conceptual issues, and then moving on to consider measurement and its interpretation.

CONCEPTUALISING HAPPINESS

“Join our group and you will find
Harmony and peace of mind”
Goldfrapp ‘Happiness’ (2007)

In science, it is axiomatic that accurate measurement demands precise definition of whatever is measured. Happiness is an emotion but “there is no general agreement in emotion science on how emotion should be defined” (Fox 2008, p.23) and emotions are variously treated as biological, cognitive, socially constructed, the perception of bodily changes, the result of cognitive appraisals, or - for example, in Scherer’s (2001) component process model - as systemic assemblages of some or all of these

elements. Whilst sophisticated conceptualisations like Scherer's break down the crude distinction between affect and cognition that psychology sometimes erroneously presupposes, in so doing they only multiply the problems of measurement. [p.843]

Philosophy is where we turn when constructs require clarification, but philosophers also disagree about what emotion might be. Recently, Griffiths (1998) offered a tripartite classification, distinguishing purportedly 'basic' emotions such as happiness (alongside sadness, disgust, surprise, fear and anger – Ekman, 1992) both from what he calls 'higher cognitive emotions', such as shame, and from the many culture-specific emotions which, he claims, are more thoroughly socially constructed. Effectively, Griffiths posits a continuum of emotion ranging from thoroughly biological at one end to thoroughly social at the other. Conversely, Prinz (2004) proposed that all emotions are simultaneously both biological *and* social. Drawing upon evidence from neuroscience, emotion studies and anthropology he suggests that there is no emotion free from the mores of culture and the practices of socialisation, nor any emotion not enabled by our biological capacities. He defines emotions as 'embodied appraisals', describing how – whatever their particular character - they serve a quasi-perceptual function in orienting us appropriately to our environments and activities.

Similar diversity can be observed within the humanities and social sciences where an emergent trend known as the 'affective turn' is currently occurring (Athanasίου, Hantzaroula, & Yannakopoulos, 2008; Clough & Halley, 2007). Within this heterogeneous movement (visible within psychology, sociology, geography, cultural studies, criminology and other disciplines) the related concepts of affect, emotion and feeling are understood as co-constituted hybrids: always enabled by, and gaining some of their character from, biology; but simultaneously enacted in ways that are structured and regulated by the discursive and performative imperatives of particular places and times. Here, as in Prinz's work, happiness and other emotions are always of the body *and* of society and culture. Moments of individual happiness appear as the intimate nexus where these disparate influences combine to enact and signify meanings that are both personal and cultural.

But despite this superficial commonality, there is extensive disagreement amongst scholars within the affective turn with regard to their objects of study. Some, influenced by psychoanalysis, understand affect as unconscious, 'primary process' activity, forever at one remove from awareness and often threatening to its integrity. Others, influenced by Deleuzian philosophy, understand it as a pre-personal intensity that is not specifically human, the motive power for the transformations and becomings of life itself. Yet others question the singular focus on affect, suggesting that its distinction from emotion is overstated and that scholars might equally emphasise either emotions or feelings (Cromby, 2007; Greco & Stenner, 2008). Indeed, the various ways that concepts of affect, emotion and feeling combine elements of the biological and the social, mobilise or conceal numerous dualisms, and are rendered unapproachable by the ineffability of the body, have long been recognised as problems without ready solutions (6, Squire, Treacher, & Radstone, 2007; Burkitt, 1999; Ratner, 2000; Williams, 2001).

In what might be considered a gesture of despair at these difficulties (Meloni, 2011), advocates of happiness research frequently claim that neuroscience provides a solid

scientific basis for their efforts. Layard's (2006, p.17-20) arguments for the objective status of happiness questionnaire responses invoke brain imaging research suggesting that differential patterns of frontal hemispheric activation are associated with responses to pleasant and unpleasant photographs, as do those of Di Tella & MacCulloch (2006). Similarly, in a discussion of conceptual issues, Oswald (2010, p.657) says "One thing we do know is that if researchers look at slices through human brains whilst people are in an MRI scanner, emotions such as happiness and sadness do show up in distinct ways". [p.844]

Whilst there is evidence that varying kinds and degrees of emotionality register differentially within the brain, "the neuroscience of happiness is still in its infancy" (Kringelbach & Berridge 2009, p.479) and evidence for the neural bases of positive (as opposed to negative) affect is both relatively rare and difficult to produce (Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000). In affective neuroscience there are many ongoing debates regarding the character, locations, composition, functions and workings of affect systems. Compounding this, many of the brain systems and areas currently thought to enable happiness (the medial prefrontal cortex, the default mode network) are significant, not just for other emotions, but for other functions entirely (Beaumont, Kenealy, & Rogers, 1996; Callard & Margulies, 2011).

More fundamentally, these claims also involve the untested assumption that happiness questionnaire responses isomorphically reflect differences in affective neural systems. There are many reasons to doubt the existence of such systematic correspondences, some of which are to do with the practices of measurement and so will be considered below. The specific claim made by Layard and others is that questionnaire responses measure an objective state called happiness, and that we know this because imaging studies of responses to 'positive' photographs reliably activate certain brain regions, so demonstrating the objective existence of happiness. Apart from the clearly fallacious reasoning, these claims are further questionable because evidence shows that the modality of engagement with a stimulus influences the brain activation patterns it generates (Phan, Wager, Taylor, & Liberzon, 2002). Activity within affective and other neural systems varies significantly according to context (e.g. Davidson, et al., 2000), and this responsiveness frequently undermines attempts to infer simple correlations with neural indices (Cromby, Newton, & Williams, 2011). For example, Vivona (2009) shows how claims for simple 'mirroring' of emotional states by a human mirror neuron system are contradicted by the (scant) empirical evidence showing that such mirroring does not always occur and, when it does, is not associated with increased activity in mirror neuron systems.

Many of these conceptual issues are recognised, albeit in an attenuated form that somewhat glosses their intransigence, in analyses produced by the ONS. Their detailed literature reviews of measures of subjective wellbeing (their favoured term) acknowledge that it is difficult to define; recognise that it may contain both collective and individual elements, and have both objective and subjective components; and accept that it is not unitary and might be subdivided into different realms (e.g. work, relationships, general life satisfaction (Allin, 2007; Layard, 2006; Waldron, 2010)). The ONS also acknowledge that no-one knows how much current life dissatisfaction is discounted by future expectations, or how current experience informs current satisfaction, and recognise that individual baselines for happiness comparisons are likely to be mobile (Allin, 2007).

Simultaneously, the ONS writings constitute what we might call a ‘governance’ genre: the business of government is to govern, and so this literary genre is thoroughly imbued with a ‘can do’ imperative. Arguments are presented largely without specialist vocabulary, using simple sentence constructions and clearly signposted frameworks. Key issues and concepts are constructed as just complex enough; difficulties are rhetorically minimised (by selectively invoking complexity and detail, throwing up comparisons and contrasts, or deflecting concern onto minor aspects of the issue); and more fundamental problems are deferred by casting them as “beyond the scope of this report” (e.g. Waldron 2010, p.11). By such means, the ONS build a case where apparent transparency is seemingly indicative of profound understanding. This allows them to both acknowledge and dismiss conceptual difficulties such as those described here, converting them into purely technical matters of methodology and measurement. [p.845]

MEASURING HAPPINESS

“When you go to measuring my success
Don't count my money, count my happiness”
Ken Dodd 'Happiness' (1964)

The ONS state that measures of subjective wellbeing include an evaluative component (a judgement regarding job satisfaction or some other aspect of one’s life), and a hedonic component or “an unfiltered measure of live as it is lived” (Waldron, 2010, p.10). Regardless of such claims, however, we must recall that what is at stake here is *self-reported* happiness, measured using a questionnaire or survey - and this is not, and never could be, simply identical to lived emotional experience.

All research methods are somewhat removed from the experiences they analyse, and this distance is arguably greater when affect, emotion and feeling are the objects of study. Nevertheless, happiness and other emotions can be effectively recorded and analysed using experience sampling techniques such as the day-reconstruction method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). They can also be studied using Q-sorts, a reverse form of factor analysis wherein participants are asked to devise quantitative hierarchies of qualitative statements (Stenner & Stainton-Rogers, 2004), and with a range of qualitative approaches that successfully reveal many of their complexities (Cromby, 2011). But the ONS reject all these methods in favour of self-report questionnaires; in this, cost is stated as an issue, alongside frequent references to the desirability of large samples. Size, however, isn’t everything, and from a psychological perspective the adequacy of self-reports as measures of happiness depends upon at least four questionable notions.

The first questionable notion, that we already know what emotion is and so can accurately measure it, has already received some attention. These difficulties may be especially acute for happiness which, by its very character, seems to be something that emerges incidentally, the unsought by-product of other activities (Smail, 1993). Ahmed (2010) observes that, etymologically, the Middle English root of happiness is ‘hap’, meaning chance: by definition, happiness arises contingently, infrequently and unexpectedly. In emotion studies and psychology, happiness is frequently seen as a transient state, sometimes associated with a ‘flow’ of activity where we cease to

reflect upon our selves and only recognised (if at all) after it has passed (e.g. de Manzano, Theorell, Harmat, & Ullen, 2010). Michell (2000) argues cogently that such phenomena, which do not have a firmly delineated phenomenology, cannot be sensibly assessed using quantitative indices. So not only might we struggle to accurately define happiness, we might also struggle to both identify and record it.

Second, questionnaires that ask us to report our own subjective experiences demonstrably require introspection. The notion that introspection generates valid and reliable reports was shown to be flawed in psychology's earliest days (Danziger, 1994). Historians have detailed how even trained introspectors, working with simple, objectively quantifiable psycho-physiological stimuli, were unable to achieve acceptable degrees of reliability. Most questionnaires appear to resolve this difficulty, first by careful item selection and 'scaling'; second, by artificially constraining variation using gross categorisation, forced choice formats and response restriction (e.g. onto a 5-point scale) to generate acceptable levels of reliability (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). But reliability does not establish validity, and these strategies cannot guarantee that any reliability they produce originates in the systematic correspondence of questionnaire responses to aspects of subjective experience. As we shall see, with respect to happiness questionnaires there is reason to suspect that at least some of its sources lie elsewhere. [p.846]

Third, questions that ask participants to judge their experience 'overall' depend upon remembering as well as introspection. The fallible, reconstructive character of memory is a basic tenet of both cognitive psychology and memory studies. In recent years, the notion of memory as an inert container from which items can be reliably retrieved has been challenged by process accounts that emphasise activities of remembering, described as centripetal (Lansdale, 1998) or as the momentary, socially mediated 'cutting out' of moments of experience (Middleton & Brown, 2005). From these perspectives, our 'overall' remembering is never a simple mirror of past experience. Remembering throws up versions of experience glimpsed in a funhouse mirror that exaggerates some aspects and disregards others, versions mediated by the many interacting influences associated with context, set, setting, intention and purpose (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Middleton & Brown, 2005).

Fourth, self-reports depend upon the humanist notion of the self-identical subject with insight into its own activities and experiences (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Sampson, 1983). With respect to happiness, this notion of the subject is contradicted by both poststructuralist and psychoanalytic accounts that place large elements of our affective lives beyond reflective awareness. It is also challenged by neuroscientific evidence demonstrating that many affect systems operate outwith consciousness and can respond to stimuli without our knowing (Damasio, 1999), and that we frequently confabulate about our own motivations and affective states (Gazzaniga, 1998). Psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and affective neuroscience are markedly different enterprises, but each provides both theories and evidence suggesting that psychologists should beware the notion that we have privileged insight into our own emotional experiences.

INTERPRETING HAPPINESS MEASURES

“This is the happy house

We're happy here, in the happy house
To forget ourselves, and pretend all's well
There is no hell."

Siouxsie & The Banshees 'Happy House' (1980)

The view that happiness questionnaires accurately capture happy experiences requires us to bracket-off profound conceptual questions; downplay difficulties associated with the elusive and occasional character of happiness; ignore the mismatch between the character of happiness and the form of these questions; and dismiss the relevance of extensively-supported concerns associated with introspection, memory and emotional insight. If this were not enough to raise serious doubts about the psychological value of these questionnaires, further concerns arise when we consider what will happen to these self-reports once they are generated. Tolman (1994) observes that this approach to measurement first of all isolates the person, who typically responds individually. The responses, which are already fragmentary, partial and tangential compared to the massively rich, incredibly complex flow of lived experience which they supposedly represent, then get summed or averaged: in so doing, an initial abstraction gets converted into a yet higher-level abstraction. Reflecting on this methodology, Tolman (1994, p.53-54) concludes that: "the actual movement is from the very concrete level of an individual human life to a level of abstraction at which no concrete individual existence is any longer recognizable".

These concerns gain particular force in the present context, for two reasons. First, it is the government's stated intention to produce aggregate or average statistics purporting to [p.847] represent the happiness of large numbers of people over extended periods of time. Second, there is an extensive literature showing that experiences of emotion are continuously fluctuating, highly variable, and inextricably bound up with social relations, power, place and activity (Ahmed, 2010; Clough, Goldberg, Schiff, Weeks, & Willse, 2007; Shields, 2005; Thrift, 2007). In lived experience, happiness and other emotions are not unitary qualities that can be meaningfully reduced to single indices. Evidence from studies of everyday emotion shows that happiness changes, moves and fluctuates, from moment to moment and day to day (Scherer, Wranik, Sangsue, Tran, & Scherer, 2004). Averaging happiness questionnaire responses across large numbers of people not only conceals differences between individuals, it also conceals the extensive, meaningful variation within individual experience.

Nevertheless, people can and do make self-reports in response to questions that ask them to assess their happiness 'overall'. For the most part they do not find these questions baffling, so they have face validity; and their answers exhibit acceptable degrees of reliability. Both the face validity and the reliability of happiness questionnaires must therefore be explained. In a complex argument that can only be briefly summarised here, Harre (2002) offers an explanation that, simultaneously, mounts a further challenge to the notion that happiness can be measured by self-report. He does so by proposing that questionnaires do not measure psychological states so much as model them.

Historically, it is well known that psychology borrowed from physics to establish both its methodologies and its ontological presuppositions (although many other influences were also hugely significant – Danziger, 1994). Along the way, Harre suggests, psychologists became confused about the distinction between instruments and

apparatus. Instruments are things like thermometers: devices that change their physical state under the causal influence of some changing property of the environment. Apparatus, by contrast, refers to devices that serve as laboratory analogues of real-world systems or processes: for example, a gas discharge tube models the various interacting dynamics of the upper atmosphere of our planet, and its current models the effects of the solar wind. Apparatus has many uses: it might, for example, generate successful predictions about the future states of real-world processes and systems. However, apparatus cannot be used for measurement: only instruments, whose momentary properties depend causally upon aspects of the changing environment, can be used this way.

Questionnaires, Harre observes, are not instruments in the manner of thermometers. When participants give written or spoken answers, mark a checklist or tick a Lickert scale, they are doing nothing other than answering (in particular, formalised ways) the questions posed by a psychologist. Consequently, there is not a consistent causal relation between participants' (presumed) psychological states and their questionnaire responses. Happiness does not exert a determinate force that always makes all human participants tick the boxes on a Lickert scale in a particular way. There is not the law-like relation between happiness and questionnaire response that exists between, say, the volume of a quantity of mercury and its temperature. This is because what actually occurs is not a process of measurement, but a precisely arranged, carefully structured, pre-emptively coded linguistic interaction. In other words, questionnaires are restrictive analogues of everyday conversations: they are apparatus, not instruments. This means that questionnaires can *model* psychological processes, but cannot sensibly be said to *measure* them. Regardless of the intentions or beliefs of those who use them, and irrespective of the painstaking and impressive work that goes into their construction and testing, we make a conceptual error if we interpret questionnaire results as measurements. [p.848]

It follows that neither the reliability nor the face validity of happiness questionnaires are a function of their ability to measure psychological states. Instead, both are entirely explicable as by-products of exactly the same shared, normative precepts that sustain everyday conversation. These precepts are derived from two sources: the semantic rules for understanding the meaning of questionnaire terms, and the autobiographical and narrative conventions that obtain when telling information to relative strangers within unusual situations. Because these rules and conventions are widely shared, self-report questions that invoke them can be readily answered (face validity). Similarly, consistency (reliability) in people's answers reflects their shared orientation to these cultural conventions and semantic rules, just as variation reflects the degrees of freedom these conventions bestow. So: "when Argyle (1987) did a study of happiness by asking people to fill in questionnaires ... he was accessing the stories people tell about their lives. So what he was getting from analysing them was a mix of semantic rules for the use of the word 'happy' and the conventions for telling autobiographical stories to strangers" (Harre 2002, p.174).

Harre's argument is challenging and many will want to preserve the possibility that happiness questionnaires, at least imperfectly, measure experience. Nevertheless, the simultaneous relevance of autobiographical conventions – for example, those indexed by sayings like "mustn't grumble"; "worse things could happen"; "you have to laugh or else you cry" – is clear. Likewise, the semantic rules governing the meaning of

words such as ‘happiness’ will necessarily become relevant, their meanings inflected with nuances derived from other relevant terms and expectations: for example to do with the (presumed) interests and intentions of government, or the significances of reporting happiness in an ‘official’ context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, happiness questionnaire responses are powerfully skewed by dominant cultural norms of self-presentation, conformity and social desirability: a recent DEFRA study of ‘life satisfaction’ in Wales produced an average score of 7.3/10; a 2007 European Social Survey of life satisfaction produced a Great Britain average of 7/10; the majority of people rate their life satisfaction as greater than 5/10, and fully 49% rate it as 7 or 8/10 (Allin, 2007).

CONCLUSION

“Don't Worry, Be Happy
Was a number one jam
Damn if I say it you can slap me - right here!”
Public Enemy ‘Fight the Power’ (1989)

So the ability of questionnaires to psychologically measure happiness is considerably less than some advocates imagine. This, in turn, might partially explain the so-called ‘Easterlin paradox’ that, for incomes of around US\$15000 and above, the linear connection between wealth and self-reported happiness seems to dissolve (Easterlin, 1974). The overall picture is of course complex: within countries there are SES gradients of self-reported happiness, with wealthier people scoring higher; similarly, lower happiness is associated with unemployment, divorce and ill health, and varies somewhat geographically (Waldron, 2010). Moreover, within economics various explanations for the paradox have been posited e.g. (Clark, Fritjers, & Shields, 2008) and evidence has recently emerged that does link absolute wealth with happiness (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). Nevertheless, most [p.849] reviews conclude that there is a disconnect between wealth and self-reported happiness once relatively modest incomes are reached, and this paradox is in fact a primary driver of debates about the merits of GDP as an index of societal wellbeing (Layard, 2006).

From a psychological perspective, this paradox appears even more striking given the robust evidence that clinical misery is consistently associated with poverty and deprivation, and that it increases in times of economic hardship. A recent review of developed nations strongly associated poverty with increased psychiatric morbidity on every commonly used indicator (Melzer, Fryers, & Jenkins, 2004). Research by Annsseau et al. (2008) showed that the incidence of clinical misery amongst economically disadvantaged individuals in Belgium is roughly twice that of wealthier people. Lewis (1993) showed that between 1977 and 1986 - the last time that a UK government embarked upon significant public spending cuts - psychiatric morbidity increased by 9%. An impressive longitudinal study by Ritsher, Warner, Johnson, & Dohrenwend (2001) found that being born to parents neither highly educated nor in skilled work tripled the risk of being given a diagnosis of major depression in later life. Moreover, the associations between inequality and clinical misery are not confined to the so-called affective disorders: longitudinal research by Harrison, Gunnell, Glazebrook, Page, & Kwiecinski (2001) demonstrated that being born in a deprived area to parents in manual labour renders you nine times more likely to be given a diagnosis of schizophrenia as an adult. In this context, a measure of happiness

that actually disconnects it from material and economic circumstance has obvious potentials for political misuse (Midlands Psychology Group, 2007).

Happiness is a widespread pre-occupation of our culture, its significances visible in the lyrics of popular songs, the writings of novelists, the messages of advertisers, the speeches of politicians, the plots of films, the status of comedy as 'the new rock and roll' and the way that positive psychology has captured the public imagination. Although the methods being used to measure happiness seem acceptable within both economics and government, they are demonstrably inadequate for other purposes; endorsement of them can only lead psychology into disrepute. Whilst the charms and attractions of happiness are undeniable, our hard-won abilities to analyse systematically and critically are still, perhaps, the greatest gifts that we possess.

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