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The politics of happiness

Richard Eckersley

Science is revealing a lot about happiness and its causes. We need to keep in mind that happiness is a social and political issue, not just an individual and personal quest. It requires us to act as citizens as well as consumers.

Karl Marx got it about right when he said that people write their own histories but not under circumstances of their own choosing. He was arguing that our lives are shaped by the social conditions in which we live as well as the personal choices we make. Psychological research makes clear that our situation matters; it influences who we are.

And so it is with the search for happiness. It needs to be seen as a social goal, as well as a personal one, in that societies can do a lot to create the conditions that make individual happiness more or less likely. This is obvious when we look at societies in turmoil: Iraq today, or Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is perhaps less obvious to say that even democratic, rich, stable societies apply powerful, if subtle, pressures on us to live in ways that undermine happiness. In these individualistic, consumer societies, there is a danger that this social perspective is being lost, and that happiness is becoming the latest must-have product

Scientific interest in happiness – or subjective wellbeing, as most scientists prefer to call it – has surged in the past couple of decades. Wellbeing is about more than experiencing positive emotions; it is about being satisfied with life, fulfilling our potential and feeling that our lives are worthwhile and have meaning. I am not concerned here with the happiness of deep personal transformation or the bliss of enlightenment, but about everyday happiness: the things that make ordinary people happy – or unhappy - their personal lives.

Our subjective wellbeing is shaped by our genes, our personal circumstances and choices, the social conditions we live in, and the complex ways in which all these things interact. Genes affect our wellbeing mainly through their influence on personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism, which are associated with higher and lower wellbeing respectively. We also now know there are genes ‘for’ depression, anxiety and addiction (that is, they are associated with increased vulnerability to these problems).

But genetic influences are not fixed or immutable. They are shaped by the environment in which we live: our upbringing, our personal experiences, even the general conditions of life. For example, even human personality traits appear to be changing over time as a result of social changes. As an Arab proverb states: ‘Men resemble their times more than they resemble their fathers.’

The evidence shows that a good marriage (or partnership), the company of friends, rewarding work, sufficient money, a good diet, physical activity, sound sleep, engaging leisure, and religious or spiritual belief and practice all enhance our wellbeing, and their absence diminishes it. Optimism, trust, self-respect and autonomy make us happier. Gratitude and kindness lift our spirits; indeed, giving support can be at least as beneficial as receiving it. Having clear goals that we can work towards, a 'sense of place' and belonging, a coherent and positive view of the world, and the belief that we are part of something bigger than ourselves foster wellbeing.

Wellbeing is powerfully influenced by perceptions and expectations. Adaptation and social comparison are especially important. We tend to adapt to changes in our situation, whether it's gaining something or losing it (although losses – of a job or partner, for example – are hard to take). Our position relative to others counts a great deal; comparing favourably elevates us, comparing poorly diminishes us. The gap between our aspirations and achievements also matters.

All in all, wellbeing comes from being connected and engaged, from being enmeshed in a web of relationships and interests. These give meaning to our lives. We are deeply social beings. The intimacy, belonging and support provided by close personal relationships seem to matter most; and isolation exacts the highest price.

There are several important points to make about the causes of wellbeing. The relationships are often, if not always, reciprocal. In other words, happier people are more likely to be married, have more friends, do more interesting work, or earn higher incomes.

Many of the factors are interrelated. For example, the costs of being unemployed go well beyond the loss of income; work also offers purpose in life, belonging and friendship. The benefits of being religious flow from the social connections, spiritual support, sense of purpose, coherent belief system and moral code that religion provides; all these things can be found in other ways (although perhaps less easily).

One source of wellbeing can compensate, at least partly, for the lack of another. Higher income matters more to single parents than to couples, and to the non-religious more than the religious. Marriage does most for people who lack friends and other social connections. Those who are single, elderly or in poor health gain most from religion.

Comparing groups on the basis of income, marital status or age can yield quite large differences in happiness, but we need to bear in mind that the differences among individuals are greater still. Groups overlap: on average, the rich do better than the poor, but many poor people have higher wellbeing than many rich people.

Finally, we need to beware that in our eagerness to be happy we don't make the pursuit of happiness yet another personal goal that is self-focused and self-defeating, a source of stress and disappointment because of unrealistic or inappropriate expectations. As the

Chinese sage Lao-Tzu advised, ‘seek not happiness too greedily, and be not fearful of unhappiness’.

This danger is reinforced by the focus of the popular media (and science) on the personal aspects of wellbeing rather than the social influences. As one researcher has warned, the new science of happiness reinforces American biases about how individual initiative and a positive attitude can solve complex problems.

A lot of the media attention on happiness has been on its relationship with money. In essence, money and what it buys constitute only a part of what makes for a high quality of life. And the pursuit of wealth can exact a high cost when it is given too high a priority – nationally or personally – and so crowds out other, more important goals. The need to belong is more important than the need to be rich; meaning matters more than money.

From the social perspective, two leading American wellbeing researchers, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman (OK), say a (partial) formula for high wellbeing is to:

- live in a democratic and stable society that meets material needs;
- have supportive friends and family;
- have rewarding and engaging work and an adequate income;
- be reasonably healthy and able to treat mental health problems;
- have important goals related to one’s values; and
- have a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose and meaning to one’s life.

The Australian Wellbeing Manifesto (www.wellbeingmanifesto.net), published in 2005 by the Australia Institute, a public-policy research institute, notes that while governments can’t legislate to make us happy, many things they do affect our wellbeing. Industrial relations laws can damage or improve the quality of our working lives; government policies can protect the environment or see it defiled; our children’s education depends on the quality of schools; tax policies can make the difference between a fair and an unfair society; and the cohesiveness of our communities is affected by city design and transport plans.

The manifesto proposes nine areas in which a government could and should enact policies to improve national wellbeing: improving working conditions; reducing working hours; protecting the environment (including through increased taxations on damaging activities); rethinking education to place more emphasis on wellbeing; investing in early childhood; discouraging materialism (including through greater regulation of advertising); building communities by supporting families, carers and community organisations; reducing inequality and building public infrastructure and services; and improving measures of wellbeing.

In my book, *Well & Good*, I say the evidence on what we need to do to improve wellbeing, socially and personally, now and into the future, boils down to this: nourish your heart, mind and soul, not just your body. Cherish intimacy, participate socially,

engage politically and believe spiritually. Apply the grandchildren test: how will the choices you make shape the world they inherit. Vote in the national and global interest, not your own. Be discerning in your use of the media. Consume modestly and regard flaunted wealth and extravagant consumption as poor taste. Obey the golden rule of treating others as you would have them treat you. Beware of simple solutions. Think for yourself.

If this advice is not enough, and you want more guidance, then here is a set of goals for action that impressed me with its simplicity and comprehensiveness – at least with respect to the social dimensions of the challenges confronting us. Fairshare International (www.fairshareinternational.org) (OK), an Australian-based global community group, has come up with a formula - 5.10.5.10 - for people who refuse to be bystanders and want to take actions that matter:

- Give at least five per cent of your gross income to organisations that assist the poor and disadvantaged and help to protect the environment.
- Reduce use of resources, including water and energy, to at least ten per cent below the national per capita average – and keep reducing.
- Spend at least five per cent of your leisure time in voluntary work helping others or tackling social and environmental challenges.
- Take significant democratic action to correct bad practices at least ten times a year, including writing letters to politicians, the media or corporations.

There are things we can do individually to improve our personal wellbeing. Some of these involve going against prevailing social and cultural pressures. Giving others greater opportunity to improve their wellbeing (that is, to increase population happiness) means changing society, not just ourselves.

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