

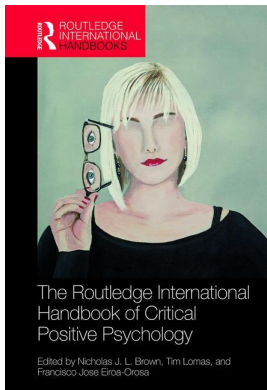
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Judging the efficacy and ethics of positive psychology for government policymaking

Mark D. White

Since the early days of the discipline, psychology has focused primarily on the negative aspects of the human mind: psychoses, neuroses, and the like. This was eminently reasonable: If the goals of a discipline are to improve human well-being and functioning, addressing conditions that impair those things will likely receive top priority at first.

But in the late twentieth century, a small number of psychologists took a different approach, acknowledging that human well-being and flourishing can be improved even if no identifiable pathologies exist. Certainly persons with such pathologies should be helped, but these psychologists aimed to broaden the application of their field to helping everyone achieve greater levels of well-being. *Positive psychology* was born when psychologists focused on what contributed to well-being in addition to what detracted from it.

Since the pioneering work of Ed Diener, his collaborators, and others, the field of positive psychology has exploded in popularity, but not without criticism. As Diener and his colleagues anticipated from the start, some commentators wrote the nascent field off as “feel-good” psychology, more appropriate for self-help books than academic study; indeed, this was the impetus for terming their focus of study “subjective well-being” rather than its more obvious name, happiness.¹ Others argued that psychologists should focus their attention and efforts on the causes of human suffering and not worry about making generally well people feel even better.

Beyond the field of psychology, the study of happiness and well-being has also found its way into the economics of policymaking, which has led to the line of criticism discussed in the current chapter. Traditionally, gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP) have been the most common ways for governments to measure the economic well-being of nations. However, economists have long recognized the shortcomings of aggregate production measures, such as the inability to track nonmarket transactions and informal labor, and the neglect of distributional issues and equity. In response to this, in 1972 King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan announced that his government would start tracking gross domestic happiness, implicitly recognizing that economic production is merely a means to the true end of human well-being in his country (Ura & Galay, 2004). More recently, in 2009 French president Nicolas Sarkozy assembled a panel of leading economists to develop a more comprehensive measure of well-being, including happiness alongside economic output, health, education, and environmental sustainability (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010). Prominent figures such as economist Richard Layard (2005, p. 147) have

asserted that “happiness should become the goal of policy, and the progress of national happiness should be measured and analyzed as closely as the growth of GNP.”

In this chapter, I will examine the use of the results of positive psychology as a tool for making economic policy. I will start with practical issues regarding defining and measuring happiness or well-being, both of which are critical to targeting either concept with policy. Next, I will discuss some ethical issues with basing policy on happiness, and I will finish with political implications of the government focusing on happiness above or alongside other concerns – some of which resemble criticisms of positive psychology itself.

Definition

At the heart of the problem with happiness policy lies the essential vagueness of the term “happiness” (or its close analogs, such as “subjective well-being”). Similar to “beauty” or “justice,” “happiness” is a term with various meanings as used by different people in different situations. In what can be seen as the conceptual background of positive psychology, the study of happiness by philosophers has resulted in various theories regarding what it is, what it consists of, and what contributes to it, yet they have reached no consensus.

The two most common and longstanding philosophical accounts of happiness are closely mirrored in positive psychology today. Two millennia ago, Aristotle (trans. 1953) wrote of *eudaimonia*, representing the deep happiness that results from a virtuous and flourishing life, which corresponds to modern psychologists’ idea of life satisfaction. A mere two centuries ago, Jeremy Bentham (1781/1988) supported a hedonic version of happiness that corresponds to momentary, transitory pleasure, also studied by positive psychologists today. John Stuart Mill elaborated on Bentham, positing higher and lower forms of pleasure in which the former was more valuable than the latter – as in the famous quotation “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied” (Mill, 1863/1987, p. 20) – implying an aspirational element to higher pleasures than resembles Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*.² As used by many positive psychologists, the term subjective well-being incorporates both momentary pleasure and life satisfaction, acknowledging the validity of both Aristotle’s and Bentham’s ideas (while introducing conceptual problems to be addressed below).³

In an attempt to reconcile the myriad other conceptions of happiness suggested by philosophers (and psychologists) over the years, philosopher Daniel Haybron (2008) devised three general categories of happiness. These include the hedonic pleasure and life satisfaction views described above, which share an emphasis on evaluation: Each requires that a person reflect on how he or she feels, either at a point in time (“how happy am I now?”) or over his or her lifespan (“how happy am I with my life?”). Haybron suggested a third understanding of happiness, which locates happiness in a person’s emotional state itself, as opposed to his or her impression of that emotional state. Richard Layard (2005, p. 6) agreed, writing that “happiness is feeling good,” while his fellow economists Marc Fleurbaey and Didier Blanchet (2013, p. 171) argued that, in reference to life satisfaction in particular, “it is not satisfaction that makes a good life, but a good life that gives satisfaction.” Ed Diener, writing with his son Robert Biswas-Diener, stressed both feeling as well as the evaluation of it: “Happiness is the name we put on thinking and feeling positively about one’s life” (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, p. 4).

On the whole, philosophy has come to see all three of these types of happiness as valid, each in its own context and circumstances; as Wayne Sumner (1996, p. 139) wrote,

[N]o simple theory about the nature of happiness enjoys much support among philosophers; there is not even agreement that such a theory is possible. About the only thing everyone agrees on is that happiness is a complex and multi-faceted notion, one not easily reduced to a formula or slogan.

In her book *Exploring Happiness*, philosopher Sissela Bok devoted an entire chapter to “Discordant Definitions,” writing in it that “such abstract terms provide ideal vessels into which people can pour quite different, sometimes clashing, meanings” (2010, p. 57). Echoing this sentiment, psychologist Daniel Gilbert (2005, p. 33) wrote that happiness

is nothing more or less than a word that we word makers can use to indicate whatever we please. The problem is that people seem pleased to use this one word to indicate a host of different things, which has created a tremendous terminological mess.

Gilbert’s fellow psychologists, including positive psychologists, have not fared much better in their attempts to settle on a single definition of happiness on which to base analysis, measurement, and recommendations. Writing with several colleagues, Ed Diener proclaimed that “the nature of happiness has not been defined in a uniform way. Happiness can mean pleasure, life satisfaction, positive emotions, a meaningful life, or a feeling of contentment, among other concepts” (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009, p. 68). Others are dismissive about the need for a canonical or even a working definition. According to positive psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky (2008, p. 32), “most of us don’t need a definition of happiness because we instinctively know whether we are happy or not,” while Daniel Gilbert (2005, p. 33) wrote that happiness is “the you-know-what-I-mean feeling.” These statements allude to the vague nature of the term “happiness” as well as the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept itself, and suggest that the word is best considered as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of meanings and connotations.

But while the umbrella nature of the word “happiness” suffices well enough for everyday conversation and correspondence, it is insufficient to ground research that attempts to measure and compare levels of happiness. In order to aggregate responses across a number of people, researchers need to be reasonably certain that all the respondents understand the question in the same way that the researchers meant it, and that they perceive the phenomenon of happiness to be the same thing that the researchers had in mind. Inasmuch as understandings of happiness are culturally based, there may be some similarity in individuals’ basic conceptions of happiness in a certain community, but this common understanding may not be sufficient to overcome variations in more precise, personal conceptions within a community. Simply asserting that “everyone knows what happiness means” does not imply that everyone knows it to mean the same thing.

For example, many happiness surveys contain questions such as “how happy do you feel at the present moment?” or “how well do you feel your life is going?,” which respondents are then instructed to answer on a numerical scale, with the steps on the scale often labeled “moderately happy,” “very unhappy,” or a neutral option (“OK”). These questions and the response procedures leave the particular conception of happiness open to the respondents to choose (more likely implicitly than explicitly), which leaves no reason to believe that any two respondents are basing their answers on the same idea of happiness, much less the researchers’ idea of happiness. This is seen by some as a feature, reflecting the subjectivity of happiness (or *subjective* well-being), but it takes subjectivity too far: Subjectivity properly refers to the individual’s private evaluation of a well-defined aspect of his or her emotional life, not what that aspect is, which should be as precise as possible to provide a fixed standard against which to understand, aggregate, and compare responses.

Measurement

Even if researchers could delineate their specific conception of happiness precisely enough that all responses reflected that conception, the subjectivity of the phenomenon of happiness itself

presents additional problems regarding measurement sufficient to ground statistical analysis, scientific study, or policy action. Whereas the problems with the definition of happiness show up in the questions asked by researchers, the problems with measurement derive from the numerical and labeled scales along which subjects respond to them, which introduce new levels of vagueness and uncertainty to the process in the guise of precision and quantification.

To start, there are issues with the meaning of the extreme ends of the scale. The lowest point, usually 0 or 1, is ambiguous. It could mean the absence of happiness – implied by 0 in particular – which does not necessarily mean the same thing as unhappiness, and it could mean extreme unhappiness – which would be represented more accurately by a negative value, not a 0 or 1. The latter interpretation suggests a different problem that also exists with the upper bound: How are people supposed to interpret the extreme bounds of happiness and unhappiness? There is a significant problem with context here: How is a person supposed to imagine ultimate happiness and unhappiness in order to place their current self-evaluation of their happiness between them? This is crucial in terms of both how the respondents understand these values and implications as well as what the researchers can reasonably assume on the part of the respondents.

Consider a widely used scale, Cantril's Ladder of Life (Cantril, 1965), which is included in the Gallup World Poll used to track happiness around the world:

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. If the top step is 10 and the bottom step is 0, on which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?⁴

The terms “the best possible life for you” and “the worst possible life for you” are meant to normalize each individual person's responses in his or her own context – and may be useful for tracing one person's self-reported happiness over time – but that context is too widely variable between persons to normalize the responses when they are aggregated. (It may vary too much for one person over time as well.)

How two different people may assess their best and worst possible life depends on any number of preconceptions about what they think life holds in store for them and what they can imagine can happen to them in the future. Philosopher Ronald Dworkin described this possibility in terms of Jack and Jill, who are both “reasonably successful in their chosen occupations” and experience the same level of pleasure, but who have very different opinions regarding what makes life valuable:

They take roughly the same enjoyment from their day-to-day life. But Jack (who has been influenced by genre painting) thinks that any ordinary life fully engaged in projects is a life of value, while Jill (perhaps because she has taken Nietzsche to heart) is much more demanding. Jack thinks, for example, that the life of a busy peasant who achieves very little and leaves nothing behind is full of value, while Jill thinks that such a life is only full of failure. If each is asked to assess the overall value of his or her own life, Jack would rate his high and Jill hers low.⁵

(R. Dworkin, 2000, p. 36)

Although focused more on socioeconomic differences than accidental influences, this problem is captured by the phenomenon of *adaptation* as identified by psychologists, philosophers, and economists. Carol Graham, a pioneer in the economics of happiness, has written about “happy peasants and frustrated achievers,” people who have evaluations of their state of happiness or life satisfaction that seem out of line with a more objective assessment of their situations

and can be explained by the ways in which they have adapted to their general life circumstances (Graham, 2010, 2011). Simply put, the peasants have adapted to their relatively meager environs and have learned to be happy with very little, while the achievers have become accustomed to greater things and are disappointed when life turns out otherwise. The peasant's idea of the worst life possible may be horrific, while his best life possible may be very modest, especially if he bases it on what is reasonably possible for him. The achiever's idea of the worst life possible may simply be mediocrity – a middle-class life, *quelle horreur* – while her idea of the best life possible may be unbounded. These frames are completely valid for each person, but may lead to survey responses that seem out of line with more observable evaluations of their circumstances.

This is no mere theoretical possibility; the popular media often reports on studies finding greater levels of reported happiness in third-world countries than in first-world countries. This is sometimes interpreted in the context of the Easterlin paradox (Easterlin, 1974), which first described a disconnect between wealth and happiness on an aggregate, national level, and helped prompt recent trends in happiness research among economists.⁶ But the issue goes far deeper than the effect of wealth on happiness or satisfaction, even considering all the direct and indirect channels through which these concepts are linked. Wealth – or, more generally, the broader circumstances of one's life, surroundings, culture, and so forth – has an effect on how a person perceives happiness and how they rate it against hypothetical upper and lower bounds. As economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1987, pp. 45–46), who has extensively studied poverty and adaptation, wrote:

The hopeless beggar, the precarious landless laborer, the dominated housewife, the hard-ened unemployed or the over-exhausted coolie may all take pleasures in small mercies, and manage to suppress intense suffering for the necessity of continuing survival, but it would be ethically deeply mistaken to attach a correspondingly small value to the loss of their well-being because of this survival strategy.

Economist and philosopher Deirdre McCloskey (2012, p. 19) wrote in a similar vein:

If a man tormented by starvation and civil war in South Sudan declares that he is “happy, no, very happy, a regular three, mind you,” we have learned something about the human spirit and its sometimes stirring, sometimes discouraging, oddity. But we inch toward madness if we go beyond people's lips and claim to read objectively, or subjectively, their hearts in a 1–2–3 way that is comparable with their neighbors or comparable with the very same South Sudanese man when he wins an immigration lottery and gets to Albany.

Consistent with Graham's happy peasants and frustrated achievers, people living in deprivation have very different ideas than do people in affluence regarding what is possible from life and where their current state fits into that range (not to mention the very concept of happiness, as described in the previous section). As McCloskey acknowledged, the perseverance displayed by those in meager circumstances may be admirable but has little to do with happiness or well-being in a sense that can be compared to those in more affluent areas with very different frames of reference.

Even if we set aside concerns about adaptation – for instance, if researchers focused on a socioeconomically homogeneous cohort – there would still remain more technical issues with converting a vague, qualitative, and subjective concept such as happiness into a numerical scale for the purposes of aggregation, averaging, and tracking over time. The exercise of quantification itself implies a precision in measurement that does not exist. For example, consider a response scale that includes designations of 3 for “mildly happy,” 4 for “moderately happy,” and 5 for “very

happy.” We can assume there is no misunderstanding regarding what the researchers mean by happiness, and even that the verbal descriptors are understood by each respondent. The application of a cardinal, unit scale implies that the difference between “mildly happy” and “moderately happy” (between 3 and 4) is precisely the same as the difference between “moderately happy” and “very happy” (between 4 and 5). In order for these responses to be averaged meaningfully, even merely for one person, the unit differences must be identical. But there is no reason to believe that respondents consider the difference between mildly, moderately, and very happy to be similar, much less identical. The addition of descriptive tags to the scale does more harm than good: Simply rating happiness on a scale from 1 to 10 without tags avoids this problem and enables the test subject to think more quantitatively when responding.

McCloskey (2012, pp. 18–19) illustrated this problem well by analogy to temperature, which is measured along a numerical scale and is also described colloquially:

If you like the temperature in Chicago today better than the one on January 15, you might be induced by the interviewer to assign 2.76 to today and a 1.45 to January 15. But such an assignment is of course arbitrary. . . . By contrast, an interval scale, such as Fahrenheit or Celsius temperature on the two days in question, does measure, 1–2–3. . . . We couldn’t base a physics on asking people whether today was “hot, nice, or cold” and expect to get anything quantitative out of it.

Individuals’ reports of how happy they feel are of value, but this value is warped and misrepresented when essentially qualitative responses are forced into quantitative slots, granting them a false precision that cannot support the summing, averaging, and comparing that happiness researchers (and policymakers) rely on. This compounds the errors introduced when persons with different backgrounds and frames of reference interpret both the questions and response options differently, resulting in “information” regarding population averages and trends over time based on questionable methodology.

The problems of applying a quantitative and precise scale to a qualitative and vague phenomenon are further compounded when several different conceptions of happiness are measured on numerical scales and then combined. In her Subjective Happiness Scale, Lyubomirsky (2008, p. 33) used four questions, two each about emotional state and life satisfaction, which are to be answered on a scale from zero to seven. She then, however, summed the responses to the four questions to arrive at the overall measure of happiness. This simple operation assumes not only that the steps on each scale are identical to each other, but that the difference between steps on any scale is equally to the same difference on any other scale: The difference between 3 and 4 on an emotional state question must be equivalent to the difference between 3 and 4 on a life satisfaction question (or 5 and 6, for that matter). This also implies that a person who answers 3 on the emotional state questions and 6 on the life satisfaction ones – a person satisfied with her life overall but who is currently having a bad time of it – is exactly as “happy” overall as a person who answers 7 on the emotional state questions but 2 on the life satisfaction ones – a person who just enjoyed tremendous success but feels strongly that he’s on the wrong life path. Both of these people have conflicted emotional lives but in very different ways, although Lyubomirsky’s Subjective Happiness Scale reduces them both to the same total of 18. Summing these different scores implies that a point on the emotional state question is equivalent to a point on the life satisfaction question, when there is no reason to believe that the points are equivalent on either scale by itself.

These problems with translating a qualitative phenomenon into a quantitative measure were well described by Fleurbaey and Blanchet (2013, p. 202) as “the gap between the open-ended nature of many dimensions of life and the bounded scale imposed by questionnaires.” To be sure,

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psychologists and philosophers too are well aware of these issues; in reference to the vagueness and malleability of happiness, Gilbert (2005, p. 70) wrote that

when we say with moderate precision what we mean by words such as *happiness*, we still can't be sure that two people who claim to be happy are having the same experience, or that our current experience of happiness is really different from our past experience of happiness, or that we are *having* an experience of happiness at all.

Along the same lines, Angus Campbell (1981, p. 23) argued that the empirical study of happiness "is based on the assumption that all the countless experiences people go through from day to day add to . . . global feelings of well-being, that these feelings remain relatively constant over extended periods, and that people can describe them with candor and accuracy." Sociologist and political economist William Davies (2015, p. 38) described this disconnect well when he wrote about happiness science that "what it grasps for is something meaningful, but it grasps for it via tools and measures that are too cold to adequately capture that meaning."

Some psychologists even wonder if self-reported happiness reports happiness at all; Jerome Kagan (2012, p. xix) asked why "psychologists are willing to believe that a verbal report of lifetime happiness, without any other information, is an accurate measure of a psychological state whose definition remains fuzzy." On a related note, many psychologists and philosophers, including Gilbert (2005) and Haybron (2008), have cast serious doubt on human beings' capacity to assess their own happiness, in the past and present as well as in the future. (See also Loewenstein & Schkade, 1999.) Even if they can, many people around the world do not have the luxury of contemplating their well-being; as Kagan (2012, pp. 83–84) wrote, "many individuals have not asked themselves how satisfied they are with their lives, and psychologists should also be uncertain of the meaning of these answers," especially given the artificial context in which they are solicited. While some psychologists have reservations, they do not seem to be reflected in the larger positive psychology community, and even when they are acknowledged, the concerns are dismissed, satisfied with asserting that everybody knows what happiness is (so let's get on with it).

Policy implementation

Aside from these methodological issues with definition, conceptualization, and measurement, there are significant ethical and practical issues with using the results from positive psychology for policy purposes, whether in terms of a large-scale happiness-based policy intended to replace traditional measures of economic output, or smaller-scale policy initiatives in which measures of happiness enter into deliberations. For the sake of argument, we can assume away the issues covered to this point and imagine that happiness can be defined precisely and clearly enough to make sure respondents have the same understanding that researchers and policymakers do; that the respondents have similar enough socioeconomic circumstances and frames of references to render their answers sufficiently comparable; and that the scales are constructed in a way that does not distort the meaning so as to prohibit summing and averaging of the resulting data.

Goals and limitations of happiness policy

Economic policy based on gross domestic product (GDP), unemployment, or inflation is guided by targets for each, which may be specified as a particular percentage rate (of growth, in the case of GDP) or an acceptable range (such 2 to 4 percent). Things become complicated when all three measures (or more) must be targeted – consider the growing calls for inequality to be

included among the target variables – but for our purposes we can focus solely on GDP growth, which is the closest analogue to happiness or well-being. Targets for the growth rate of GDP are themselves based on a number of factors, such as population growth, technological development, and other government policies, all of which narrow down reasonable expectations for growth: high enough to sustain employment and standards of living while low enough to prevent excessive inflation (according to mainstream understanding of macroeconomic theory and policy). In other words, policymakers aim for the optimal growth rate of GDP, sometimes referred to as the “natural” rate of growth, rather than simply maximizing GDP.

There would seem to be no analogous physical or technological restraints on happiness, however. Should the goal of happiness policy then be to maximize total happiness? Perhaps surprisingly, no: There are a number of problems that parallel those with GDP, and suggest that policymakers should target an “optimal” level of happiness, as counterintuitive as that may sound (even more so to potential voters).⁷ Note that these concerns apply even if happiness is merely one of many measures of well-being, as suggested by Layard (2005, p. 147) and the members of Nicolas Sarkozy’s research team (Stiglitz et al., 2010, p. xxvi). The focus here is on the way that happiness is to be sought, rather than whether it is the only thing to be sought.

First, no policy goal can be furthered without costs: Trade-offs are a ubiquitous implication of scarce resources. While the government can certainly find inexpensive ways to boost happiness, such as encouraging people to practice beneficence more often, after a point any increase in happiness will come at the cost of other valuable goals. When this happens, the pursuit of happiness will by necessity be constrained by the pursuit of other goods, which will imply limits of the pursuit of happiness itself – limits that can either be incorporated into the target or managed on a case-by-case basis according to the trade-offs in any given situation. In either case, however, happiness cannot simply be maximized outside of other contexts and priorities.

Furthermore, if distinct kinds of happiness are recognized by policymakers, a plan for managing the trade-offs between them will need to be developed. One can imagine a conflict between funding of high culture and low culture, or vocational education and graduate education, in which not only are the happiness of two different groups of citizens at stake, but different kinds of happiness as well. This also applies at the individual level if the government decides to focus on life satisfaction to the exclusion of momentary pleasure, or vice versa. Insofar as they are affected by policies designed according to whichever type of happiness the government promotes, individuals’ choices of how to balance these two types of happiness – in cases where they come into conflict – could be adversely affected. A focus on momentary pleasure would discourage people from sacrificing short-term joy to achieve greater long-term satisfaction, and a focus on long-term satisfaction would discourage people from enjoying occasional short-term pleasures if they come at the cost of long-term goals (which seems to be the more significant danger currently, as seen with paternalistic trends in food and dietary policy, for example). Happiness policy needs to be guided by a chosen measure of happiness, whether it favors one type of happiness over another or a combination of many, and this chosen measure need not correspond to any individual’s own conception of happiness (much less that of all individuals).

Second, just as growth in GDP is limited by resource constraints and the threat of inflation, happiness is limited in surprisingly similar ways, sometimes more so than GDP itself. For instance, consider the astonishing degree of development and progress made by the human race in terms of technology, science, and philosophy, which cannot be matched to growth in happiness. As described by Fleurbaey and Blanchet (2013, p. 163):

Our species has considerably evolved since it left its African cradle 70,000 years ago. It has progressively conquered the whole planet, assimilating or eliminating other human species,

and has now gained an amazing and even self-endangering power over its surroundings. It has proliferated considerably, and about two-thirds of it has reached an unprecedented level of longevity, consumption, and sophistication. If happiness surveys had been conducted over this whole period, one would perhaps find a remarkable stability in happiness scores over the millennia.

In other words, even though conditions are much better for the average person now compared to five hundred years ago, it is hard to imagine the average person's happiness increasing by the same proportion. The average person in the sixteenth century may have been reasonably happy five centuries ago by the standards of the time, as is the average person in the twenty-first century. Even if the latter were significantly happier, it is unlikely to be by the same degree that his or her objective standard of living has increased, implying a significant degree of adaptation over the years.

The preceding argument relied on only an intuitive sense of what happiness is, but the problem is much clearer when the standard methodology of assessing happiness, as described above, is considered. Simply put, the scales along which respondents are instructed to answer questions are defined in relative terms, which accommodate the adaptation just discussed, and it is also bounded. As McCloskey (2012, p. 19) put it, "The scale is 1–2–3. Of course it levels off: The ceiling, namely 3, is built into the question, and so the survey researcher gets back what she put in." If the average person at a given time is near the top of the scale in reported happiness, nearly as happy as they can imagine, there is no way that future respondents can give a higher score, even if their objective standard of living is magnitudes higher. More likely, their expectations would rise as well, exploiting the relative nature of the scale.

This implies that, while small increases in happiness or well-being may be possible to achieve from time to time, a sustained increase in overall happiness is unlikely, due to adaptation. Psychologists call this the *hedonic treadmill*: People work harder to achieve more happiness, but soon adapt to that level of happiness, so they work even harder to achieve more (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). In the end, they work harder and harder but their happiness never permanently rises. This is reminiscent of the way inflation moderates the ambitions of policies designed to boost GDP: Too much growth generates inflation, which absorbs purchasing power and restores GDP (in inflation-adjusted terms) to its starting point (but with permanently higher prices). Also, some psychologists posit a *set point* to individual happiness, a genetic predisposition that determines a person's baseline, around which he or she may vary according to transitory circumstances (Seligman, 2002, ch. 4). Taken together, these factors imply a certain degree of futility to policymaking meant to increase happiness. Economist Richard Easterlin (of the Easterlin paradox) argued that "not only is public policy likely to be ineffective [at increasing happiness] but there is little an individual can do to improve his or her well-being, except, perhaps, consult a psychologist" (2005, p. 30).⁸ Some psychologists agree; for example, Ed Diener and Richard E. Lucas (1999, p. 227) wrote that "the influence of genetics and personality suggests a limit on the degree to which policy can increase [subjective well-being]."⁹

Sources and distribution of happiness

Above we discussed issues that arise when different types of happiness are acknowledged by policymakers, necessitating some way of managing the trade-offs between them. But even if we assume just one heterogeneous conception of happiness, the source of that happiness is of normative concern (familiar to critics of utilitarianism) when it comes to policy initiatives (large and small).

First, government promotion of happiness or well-being in general implies that all sources of these feelings are legitimate. However, there are some activities or impressions that create happiness but raise ethical questions. For instance, some people derive happiness from the misfortune or suffering of others, ranging from the simple *schadenfreude* at seeing a work rival denied a promotion, through the perverse joy of a racist seeing the cause of civil rights frustrated (whether or not the racist had any active role in it), to the sick thrill felt by some persons from assaulting another. If these negative sources of happiness are few and far between, they may be accepted as unfortunate “error terms” in the measurement of happiness, much as the manufacture of harmful products such as cigarettes nonetheless contributes to GDP. But if these feelings are pervasive enough, they can potentially influence policy decisions; it is not difficult to imagine the decline in happiness in some areas due to the “threat” of increased immigration or religious diversification leading to policies to ameliorate this decline. (This also suggests that happiness policy is no less likely to produce “tyrannies of the majority” than other democratic bases for policy, in which the preferences of the majority can endanger essential rights of a minority.) While it is easy to dismiss such sources of happiness as antisocial, it is more difficult to correct happiness measures for them, or even to draw the line between merely impolitic and truly dangerous sources of happiness – this requires a value judgment far more intrusive than that required by imposing happiness as a policy goal in the first place.

Second, some sources of happiness may be regarded as artificial or inauthentic, implying that some attempts to increase happiness or well-being may produce illusory effects rather than the “real thing” as intended by policymakers. The philosophical context for this is Robert Nozick’s experience machine, which can produce the impression of having one’s every desire satisfied; the question he poses, then, is whether anyone would want to use such a machine as opposed to having real experiences, even if the mental effect is the same (Nozick, 1974, pp. 42–45). We can see a similar effect on a smaller scale with medicines prescribed for depression or anxiety. In his 2006 book *Artificial Happiness*, philosopher and medical doctor Ronald W. Dworkin recounted stories of patients in horrible circumstances who took antidepressants and then felt much happier, despite nothing about their life having changed. Had they taken a happiness survey, they may have shown tremendous improvement that would not have reflected improvements in their objective well-being; it would be more like instantaneous adaptation without the awareness we often associate with it. This does not speak against the use of anti-depressive drugs for treatment, but it does caution against the reliance on happiness measures that may be unduly influenced by them; the danger is that widespread use of such drugs can artificially boost the resulting happiness report and mask problems that the government aims to address.

Another source of inauthentic happiness may be that which arises from relative comparisons. It is well-known that many people compare their status, position, and wealth with their peers and neighbors and derive significant happiness (or unhappiness) from these comparisons; this is yet another aspect of adaptation, admittedly on a somewhat smaller scale. Again, insofar as happiness is understood to reflect, primarily yet indirectly, one’s objective state of well-being, an outsized influence from social comparisons would counter that. On the level of policy, this leads to what Luigino Bruni (2008) called the “social treadmill,” in which people work hard to increase their relative status and move up the social scale, only to feel inferior to their new peers (who are doing the same); they must continue to work hard to keep up but can never get ahead. Similar to the hedonic treadmill, people exert considerable effort to be happier, but due partly to the social effect of everyone else doing the same, this effect is self-defeating in the end. This unhappiness may reflect the negative emotional effects of hypercompetition and status obsession, but it also masks actual increases in material well-being, again complicating the ostensibly straightforward and simple measures of happiness.

The inauthenticity of happiness based on relative comparisons also highlights the importance of distribution of well-being to policy deliberations and brings us back to the goals of happiness policy. Policy that aims to either maximize or optimize happiness will ignore distributional issues, leading to question such as: Should happiness be experienced equally across the population, and would the government be concerned with “happiness inequality” in the same sense that inequality of income or wealth has been given more attention recently? Again, adaptation to circumstances that leads to “happy peasants and frustrated achievers” may lead to policymakers directing more resources to boost the happiness of the achievers simply because they may have been led to expect more from life, while the peasants who are content with their lot receive little. The philosophical precedent for this is the “utility monster,” the person who experiences outsized increases or decreases in utility from ordinary events and therefore has a disproportionate effect on the utilitarian calculus (Nozick, 1974, p. 41).

What goes unappreciated in discussions of happiness policy, but is well known from traditional welfare economics and political philosophy, is that adaptation and the heterogeneous emotional responses to events have a significant effect on the outcomes for various policy goals with respect to happiness. If happiness is to be maximized or optimized, then policy should focus on generating the most happiness possible within given resources, which implies that those most sensitive to changes – the “utility monsters” – should be the first priority. If happiness is to be equalized, however, then the focus would shift to those whose happiness is lowest and most difficult to raise; in this case, the utility monsters are easily placated and efforts can be redirected to the less responsive. The class implications of these various policy orientations are unclear, given that happiness in this sense is disconnected from socioeconomic circumstances; but an inconvenient truth may be that the unhappiest and the least resistant to efforts to make them happier are the most well off in objective terms. Even a Rawlsian imperative to benefit the least well-off must be frustrated by this outcome; the outcry were an heir or heiress to a billion-dollar fortune to be the recipient of government largesse simply because he or she were dissatisfied with their position relative to their peer group would be deafening.

Role of government in ensuring happiness

The preceding discussion of the goals of happiness policy and the counterintuitive implications when it is combined with the psychological dynamics of happiness as described by positive psychologists lead to the most general criticism of government focus on happiness: Is it a proper focus for the state in the first place?

Policy based on happiness is a public relations expert’s dream: Who could possibly argue with making people happier? But even though happiness in some conceptions may be an intrinsic good, it is not necessarily the only good; as Nozick (1989, p. 99) wrote, “Happiness can be precious, perhaps even preeminent, yet still be one important thing among others.” There are some who take happiness to encompass all possible goods in life, to be the *summum bonum*, but most who support its use for policy recommend its measurement alongside other economics and social values, including GDP, health, education, and environmental sustainability (which raises issues of how to balance the happiness goals against others, similar to balancing different types of happiness).

Even if it is included as part of a broader composite index, however, any substantial focus on happiness still raises questions. For instance, should the government focus on raising happiness across the board instead of addressing the suffering of the disadvantaged and underprivileged? While everyone benefits to some extent from the activity of government, some *need* state assistance more than others, and some would argue that the state should focus its limited resources

on helping those who most need it.¹⁰ This criticism parallels those of positive psychology that argue that psychologists should maintain their traditional focus on treating the mental and emotional ailments of the suffering rather than helping nonsufferers be even happier.

The argument from ignorance adds a practical and ethical dimension to this criticism by pointing out that happiness measures do not accurately capture any individual's unique conception of happiness, much less that of a large group of people. As a result, government measures of happiness report a phenomenon disconnected from actual happiness, and policy based on such a measure will not serve to increase it (except perhaps by accident). This argument can be made in reference to any government policy meant to work for the people's "own good," which the government has no way of knowing, necessitating the imposition of policymakers' own idea of the people's true interests.¹¹ Bok (2010, pp. 54–58) described definitions of happiness as Rorschach tests that reveal much about the preconceptions and values of those proposing the definitions, a description that applies well to researchers' and policymakers' construction of happiness measures and surveys, even if this happens unconsciously and without intended bias.

Finally, the larger political and philosophical issue is whether the government should devote resources to defining and measuring happiness – even if it could be done well – and using the resulting data to design policies to increase happiness, as opposed to addressing problems in society that present themselves. This is a problem with any statistics-based governance, whether based on gross domestic product or gross domestic happiness: Policymakers mine the data for problems instead of looking out their windows or at a newspaper to see the problems staring them in the face (White, 2014). Policymakers should not have to collect data on happiness to see that people are starving, homeless, and unemployed; they should know that already and address those problems directly. The best way for government to increase happiness may be to confront the problems that decrease it rather than make ineffective and unethical attempts to increase it.

Conclusion

In terms of science and clinical practice, positive psychology is tremendously valuable in terms of augmenting psychology's traditional focus on mental ailments and illnesses. However it is defined or understood, happiness or well-being is an important, if not the most important, aspect of human lives, and to one extent or another it should be promoted. This chapter has argued that the way in which happiness research is conducted and included in policymaking processes is misguided because happiness is too vague, multifaceted, and subjective a phenomenon to be accurately measured in a way conducive to aggregation, averaging, and tracking over time. Furthermore, this is a fundamental aspect of the concept of happiness that cannot be circumvented by creating better survey instruments or developing more elaborate statistical methods. If governments sincerely want to improve the happiness of their citizens, more indirect methods are available, from using imperfect proxies such as GDP or composite indices that include factors such as health and education, to trusting people to promote their own happiness and focusing instead on giving them the tools to do it, and dealing with specific problems that threaten it. If governments tackled problems that presented themselves rather than "finding" them in artificially created data, people would certainly be much happier.

Notes

- 1 See Carol Diener's foreword to Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008).
- 2 Nussbaum (2005) describes Mill's version of happiness as a middle ground between Bentham's and Aristotle's.
- 3 For a critique of psychologists' reliance on Aristotle and Bentham, see Nussbaum (2010).

- 4 Taken from the Gallup website (www.gallup.com/poll/122453/understanding-gallup-uses-cantril-scale.aspx).
- 5 See R. Dworkin (2000, ch. 1) for general concerns about scales and rankings of well-being.
- 6 For a skeptical reexamination of the Easterlin paradox, see Stevenson and Wolfers (2008).
- 7 On the possibility of optimal happiness, see Oishi, Diener, and Lucas (2007) and Oishi and Koo (2008).
- 8 Fleurbaey and Blanchet pointed out the irony in that “the ‘paradox’ in Easterlin’s paradox is that it has served to popularize the happiness challenge to the economic approach, whereas it is the best proof that the happiness approach is problematic” (2013, p. 173).
- 9 See also Lucas (2008).
- 10 In philosophical terms, this is known as *prioritarianism*, which differs from utilitarianism in that it gives more weight to the well-being of the worst-off in society rather than treating everyone’s well-being equally (Parfit, 2002).
- 11 See, for instance, White (2013, 2014).

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