



Introduction: Happiness Studies

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Introduction

1.1 This special section of Sociological Research Online grew out of the activities of the British Sociological Association's Happiness Study Group between 2009-2013^[1]. In recent years a number of us have felt that mainstream sociology has failed to develop a sophisticated engagement with ideas around happiness. Despite a popular culture saturated with notions of happiness and an emerging policy engagement connecting with wellbeing, there has been little sociological research or publication in this area. The papers in this collection demonstrate in various ways how happiness research is relevant to sociology, connecting as it does with some of the key debates and issues that frame the sociological enterprise. Many of the articles also examine why sociologists have been reticent about happiness research, and in highlighting these concerns we challenge the wider sociological community to engage with happiness studies more intensively than has been the case so far. We hope therefore that this collection will catalyse a sustained debate, promoting scholarship and raising the profile of happiness research amongst sociologists.

1.2 Our papers illustrate the curious neglect of happiness studies by British sociology. Contributors suggest various reasons for this situation. Some argue that dominant paradigms in sociology identifying the problems and dysfunctions of modernity have marginalised research that wishes to focus on a broader spectrum of positive as well as negative experiences. Research funding is won and academic careers are made through the examination of pathologies – poverty, illness, crime and the reduction in suffering – rather than via the investigation of the good things in life and society. Yet when we reflect on our experiences in life it does seem odd that so many books that could enlighten us about wellbeing or happiness are in reality about the absence of these things. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Cieslik 2013), happiness is bizarrely constructed by some contemporary sociologists as a personal and social 'problem' and as a device to focus attention on the 'dark side of modernity'. Others such as Alexandra Jugureanu et al. in our collection of papers suggest that the increasing specialisation within sociology and the nature of disciplinarity have worked against research that takes a more holistic approach to everyday experiences that contribute to wellbeing across domains, e.g. families, employment, leisure and education. They chart the historical change in the understanding of happiness and how with modernity and its shifting relationships a far more psychological and essentialist conception has come to dominate our views on wellbeing. The authors suggest that we would be wise to revisit earlier classical teachings on happiness and its insights into the social nature of wellbeing.

1.3 As we have written elsewhere (Bartram 2012; Cieslik 2013) contemporary British sociologists have tended to understand happiness in quite narrow ways informed by psychological research into subjective wellbeing – where happiness is often seen as a positive emotional state (joy, pleasure) or as comprising the absence of negative aspects (sadness, anxiety). Some notions of reflexivity are usually involved in these conceptions so that reflection on personal wellbeing can generate understandings of life satisfaction or quality of life. The paper by Laura Hyman demonstrates some of the ways that individuals reflexively construct their happiness: individuals look back at their past lives as an active process of generating positive experiences in the present. One implication of such qualitative research is that wellbeing is far more reflexive than is commonly suggested by survey researchers and policy makers alike; hence there are questions here about how best we can capture such experiences through alternatives to survey methods.

1.4 There are longstanding traditions of survey research into wellbeing developed by economists and psychologists, and some of these approaches have been influential for more sociological studies as well. The paper by Christian Kroll examines some of these approaches while also employing more mainstream theoretical ideas such as social capital in his analysis of changing wellbeing across the life course. He unpacks the paradox of how middle age is often associated with lower subjective wellbeing scores for individuals yet the mid-life phase is often associated with greater levels of sociability and social capital.

He raises some interesting questions about the ways that social capital and sociability function at different points in our biographies as well as their relative influence on our wellbeing. The paper by Jan Eichhorn illustrates how quantitative work into happiness can adopt a far more radical approach to wellbeing than is often seen in such work. Here the author critiques the surveys conducted by the British government into wellbeing and efforts to measure and compare wellbeing in different parts of the United Kingdom. Eichhorn argues that far more complex conceptions and modelling of wellbeing will be needed if we are to develop more robust and genuinely useful surveys into national wellbeing. The paper by Vanhoutte and Nazroo also seeks to promote new ways of surveying wellbeing, illustrating how competing definitions of wellbeing as either hedonic or eudaimonic often hinder quantitative research designs commonly used in wellbeing studies. The authors demonstrate ways of developing more complex models of wellbeing to reflect these diverse definitions of wellbeing.

1.5 Neil Thin's paper identifies some of the challenges and opportunities we face in developing a sociology of happiness. Like many of the papers included here, he points to the influence of psychology and economics on wellbeing research, such that wellbeing is often understood in essentialist terms as qualities or characteristics of individuals best accessed via quantitative/survey methods. In contrast, a more sociological perspective suggests a far more social, relational and processual understanding of happiness. Happiness then is not just a subjective state that individuals pursue in a Utilitarian way but one that is also rooted in the sometimes collaborative, sometimes conflictual relationships that make up our daily lives. Researching what happiness means to people and how we struggle over it indicates that happiness studies involves the analysis of many of the ideas that form the 'bread and butter' of sociology – power relationships, divisions, inequalities, identities, social and personal change, structure and agency, etc.

1.6 We argue then happiness studies deserves far more attention from British sociologists, as happiness is experienced in ways that connect to those structural and agential processes that frame the sociological imagination. By the same token, the papers published here suggest that the sociological study of happiness also raises some interesting questions about doing sociology. Though certain modes of talking about happiness can be problematic (fostering myths about wellbeing in inherently unequal and consumerist societies), happiness can also be understood in far more ambitious and subtle ways. The pursuit and experience of happiness involve very personal struggles in life (especially as we grow old) that are implicated in fundamental relationships of loving, working, learning and losing that are at the heart of what it means to be human. How we navigate our way to old age with loved ones and make decisions about what is a good life and a good community are all integral parts of happiness studies – yet these are issues that we seldom find discussed by sociologists (though see Andrew Sayer 2011). The study of happiness then calls for a far more holistic approach to research where we challenge the over-specialisation of contemporary sociology and the artificial boundaries between sociologists researching education, families, migration, employment, etc. It also calls for sociology to be more open to ideas from other disciplines (e.g. philosophy, economics and psychology) that can offer insights into debates about human nature, ethics and character. Happiness studies also raises some challenging questions about the ways that sociologists conventionally distinguish between fact and values – for happiness studies is very much concerned with what people value and how such values inform what we do.

1.7 A greater sociological involvement in happiness studies offers much promise. It can facilitate analyses of everyday experiences and the changing identities of individuals. It can help us understand how good and bad times are structured by unequal patterns of resources and opportunities. It can encompass the myriad ways that modernity creates suffering yet also document and explicate how people live good lives despite such difficulties, striving for more positive and life-enhancing experiences. Happiness studies can open up all manner of research questions for sociologists from the mundane to the epic while also offering some refreshingly different ways of doing sociology.

Notes

¹Please contact Mark.Cieslik@Northumbria.ac.uk for more details of the British Sociological Association Happiness Study Group.

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