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A Short Introduction to Happiness in Social Sciences



Abstract

This article explores aspects of sociological and economical approaches to happiness research. It will first look at how the discipline of sociology has engaged with happiness research so far and what some of the future directions could be; and it will then look into the discipline of happiness economics (or behavioural economics as it is sometimes referred to), as it is one of the social sciences that have engaged with happiness research in ways that move beyond the traditional concerns in economics.

KEYWORDS happiness, wellbeing, happiness economics, social indicators, positive psychology, interdisciplinary research

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Introduction

A significant body of research on happiness has emerged in recent years with scholars from different social scientific disciplines starting to express an academic interest in this topic. Considered one of the few examples of successful interdisciplinary research (FREY – STUTZER 2007), happiness studies have grown as a substantive field since the second half of the 20th century¹. With a burgeoning body of literature, it would be beyond the limitations imposed by this article to review all of the key themes, concerns and controversies that have emerged and developed. This paper aims to be located in the field of existing sociological research, but also in the broader happiness literature, and thus it explores aspects of sociological and economical approaches to happiness research.

Despite the relative young age of the field of happiness studies, the last three decades have seen an exponential increase in the interest in happiness and wellbeing expressed by academics in different social scientific disciplines. The majority of studies in the field use the concept of *happiness* or *subjective wellbeing* as the objects of their inquiry, with an initial wave of academic literature focusing on correlates of happiness and social indicators. Happiness research shows a problematic divide between the two methodological approaches – qualitative and quantitative – which is not just in sociology, but also across the different social sciences implicated in happiness research. On the one hand, quantitative studies generally seek to measure happiness on a societal level across geography and across time periods – these can be transversal or longitudinal studies. On the other hand, qualitative studies include other variables, like culture, identity or emotions and seek to explore everyday experiences of happiness – this type of literature is scarce, but in recent years scholars have expressed an increasing interest in this type of exploration (see HYMAN 2014 and CIESLIK 2013). The lack of qualitative research is seen by some to be a good reason for sociologists to engage with and contribute to the field of happiness studies (Bartram 2011). Finally, there is one last characteristic that distinguishes the conceptual approaches in this article from the majority of studies on happiness, and that is questioning the rhetoric of ‘the *science* of happiness’. Scholars across the social sciences seem to take the concept of ‘science’ for granted, without much room for debate as to whether happiness studies constitute a science or not. The University of California, Berkeley offers a course titled ‘The Science of Happiness’ (starting September 2014), while MIT² offered a course titled ‘The Art and Science of Happiness’ (2013), so in this case it is presented as both science and art. Furthermore, a search on Google Scholar for ‘science of happiness’ returns a large number of scholarly articles and books with both ‘science’ and ‘happiness’ in the title, and even the papers that offer a critique of the field or some critique of positive psychology³ still do not question whether happiness studies can indeed be categorised as a ‘science’. However, this article does not attempt to make the case for or against happiness studies as being a science, but rather open the subject to further debate.

For the remainder of this article, I will first look at how the discipline of sociology has engaged with happiness research so far and what some of the future directions could be; and

¹ In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) published the *Constitution of World Health Organization*, where it defined health as a ‘a state of complete physical, mental, and social well being not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’, and also proposed and developed ways of measuring and promoting the quality of life of people around the globe. (WHO 1948; CIESLIK 2013).

² Massachusetts Institute of Technology

³ MILLER 2008.

second I will look into the discipline of happiness economics (or behavioural economics as it is sometimes referred to), as it is one of the social sciences that have engaged with happiness research in ways that move beyond the traditional concerns in economics (CIESLIK 2013).

Happiness in Sociology

Turning a blind eye

The *Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (2014) edited by Susan David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers, is a thick book of 1104 pages, described in the Oxford University Press catalogue as '[t]he most comprehensive handbook on happiness ever published, exploring psychological, philosophical, evolutionary, economic, and spiritual approaches to happiness in a single volume'. Searching the volume for the words 'sociology' or 'sociological' would return 20 results, almost all relating to names of university departments (e.g. *School of Sociology and Social Policy*), or to journal names in the bibliography section (e.g. *American Journal of Sociology*). It is, perhaps, at least peculiar that '[t]he most comprehensive handbook on happiness ever published' does not include any sociological research, critique or outlook on happiness. Similarly, the six volume set *Wellbeing: A Complete Reference Guide* (Wiley-Blackwell 2014) edited by Cary Cooper has no mention of sociological angles on wellbeing, and *The World Book of Happiness* (2010) edited by Leo Bormans that comprises the work of 100 researchers from 50 countries, includes but two sociological contributions.

Sociologists' reluctance and scepticism about happiness research seem odd when considered in the context of long standing philosophical traditions in this area – from Eastern philosophers and Ancient Greek stoics to Enlightenment thinkers – and also in the context of more recent psychological contributions. Writers from these traditions discuss the wishes and desires that everybody appears to have: to be happy and to enjoy life. There is perhaps 'no other goal in life that commands such a high degree of consensus' (FREY – STUTZER 2002. vi.). Moreover, early discussions about this apparent ubiquitous aspiration are presented in a larger context that, in fact, offers 'a sophisticated appreciation of the different dimensions of wellbeing that illustrate the enigma of happiness' (CIESLIK 2013. 5.). Without extrapolating to all periods in human history (see JUGUREANU et al. 2014. on the sociogenesis of the concept of happiness), happiness has been and is today, to some extent, a skill to be learned. Learning to live a good life and to be happy requires effort, time and dedication like any other prowess, as Aristotle attests in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the self-help industry today 'sells' happiness much within the same creed, that happiness is a practice, and a skill that can be learned. In this way, from Eastern philosophers and Greek stoics to modern day self-help gurus, life coaches, motivational speakers, and personal development professionals, what they all seem to have in common is the principle of teaching others about the skills necessary for a happy, balanced and flourishing life.

Despite its place in classic sociology (in the work of Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Comte), the contemporary study of happiness remains both under-researched and under-represented in cross-disciplinary accounts. Although classic sociologists did not always clearly use the words 'happiness' or 'subjective wellbeing', their work often implied happiness in a certain context. Durkheim, for instance, looked at the relationship between anomie and social cohesion, and indicated that individuals should pursue happiness through a new moral order defined by community and by rituals (DURKHEIM 1961 [1912]); Comte, in his foundation of positivism

linked the intellectual and moral crisis with the pursuit of happiness (PLÉ 2000) and argued that people can only cultivate and attain their happiness in society (CASTRO 1997); Simmel held individualism to be the foundation for happiness (GLATZER 2000); Weber presented how life was defined by the protestant ethic and the extent to which individuals would make choices that would grant them divine redemption (WEBER 2002 [1904]); and Marx deduced that capitalism, concomitantly with alienation would make people clearly unhappy (Marx and Engels 1988).

However, sociology's scepticism towards approaching happiness as a domain of investigation can be traced to the early works of Marx and Durkheim (Cieslik 2013). Both Marx and Durkheim have argued that modern societies fabricate new wishes and needs, while encouraging an individualistic lifestyle that often equates consumerism with the key to being happy. Few contemporary sociologists (VEENHOVEN 2008; ABBOTT – WALLACE 2012; CIESLIK 2013, BARTRAM 2011) have attempted to root the dearth of sociological approaches to happiness research. CIESLIK (2013), referring to traditions in classical sociology, particularly to Marx and Durkheim's sociology, argues that '[t]hese analyses of the rise of individualism, the growth of egoistic conceptions of happiness and critiques of empiricist-reductionism theories established a powerful formula for many later sociological approaches to happiness.' (CIESLIK 2013. 5.). VEENHOVEN (2008), on the other hand, associates the absence of happiness research in sociology with three motives, which are pragmatic, ideological and theoretical. They are pragmatic because sociologists are generally concerned with human behavior rather than with emotions, ideological due to the discipline's preference for certain types of measurements (e.g. looking at social equality to measure objective wellbeing), and they are theoretical particularly due to how happiness is defined by sociologists, some consider it akin to a 'whimsical state of mind' (VEENHOVEN 2008. 44.). Indeed, a lot depends on how the researcher defines the object of study, as HYMAN (2011) observes; for sociologists, happiness appears to be an elusive emotion, a state or a process. Just like love, happiness is 'knowable only intuitively, at the level of feeling' (JACKSON 1999. 100.), it is something that humans experience at the level of the nervous system, and that makes it a subject that 'sits outside of the scope of sociological inquiry' (HYMAN 2011.106.).

Furthermore, some sociologists (MARCUSE 1964; RIEFF 1966; COHEN – TAYLOR 1976; LASCH 1979; FUREDI 2004) question both the place and the attainability of happiness in contemporary societies. Much of the prevailing criticism addresses the individualistic emphasis placed on how one becomes happy, the kind of very simplistic ways of approaching happiness perpetuated by the self-help industry and mainstream media that overlooks socio-economics conditions, but zooms in on the individual. Often, the picture of the simple ideas that people have about happiness and ways to achieve it is problematic for sociologists, as these ways are seen to corrode 'authentic political, and cultural ways of existence' (CIESLIK 2013. 4.).

Continuing the appreciation of happiness studies as 'self-help', some sociologists are inclined towards critically engaging with more 'negative' topics, like alienation or vulnerability, and view the act of researching happiness as naïve, partly due to the impression that happiness studies are a 'ground marked out by self-help writers' (BARTRAM 2011. 18.).

In recent sociology, BAUMAN (2008) in his book *The art of life*, associates happiness with good feeling and considers it to be central to his notion of liquid modernity, by virtue of underpinning the fluid and dynamic cultures. The consumerist promise of a happy life leads people to search for an elusive fulfilling way of life, as the commodified understandings of happiness are not enough, therefore people seem to be 'trapped in an endless search for a better life' (CIESLIK 2013.4.). Similarly, HOCHSCHILD (2003) also sees happiness as problematic evoking some of the

same concerns that happiness has lost its deeper sense and meanings as a result of long-term processes of commodification.

Traditionally, sociology has been known to be the study of social problems, of the structure and functioning of human society, being generally concerned with issues pertaining to the sphere of the pathological. Happiness research stems from the discipline of psychology, partly as a backlash against the prominence of 'negative' concerns, but this kind of focus on dysfunction has also characterised sociology 'where one finds a central role for concepts such as anomie, alienation, disenchantment, inequality and (more recently) vulnerability.' (BARTRAM 2011. 15.). Furthermore, a study of happiness, wellbeing or human flourishing appears to not sit well with any particular sociological subfield (HYMAN 2011). For example, at each British Sociological Association Annual Conference of the last four years, happiness papers have been placed in different streams in search for an ideal fit, from *Medicine, Health and Illness* to *Work, Employment and Economic Life*. Arguably, happiness papers could fit in all of the streams, depending on the argument and research outlook.

Finally, scholars have also argued that happiness has actually always been a concern of societies and has been relevant to the study of society (FRAWLEY 2012), however social scientists have only recently showed a renewed interest in happiness after a long period of being concerned with the negative. 'Sociology's blind eye'⁴ for happiness can thus be explained by sociologists' long-held 'preoccupation with misery' (VEENHOVEN 2006. 4.), despite it having a bearing on '19th century founding fathers of sociology' (VEENHOVEN 2006. 3.).

How sociology can help

Despite, or perhaps because of 'sociology's blind eye for happiness', there are now few researchers who argue that the discipline of sociology has the necessary tools to correct the difficulty that happiness research is, as REEVES (2009. 24.) describes it, profoundly 'over-researched and under-theorised'. Over the past twenty years, happiness research across the social sciences has produced a large array of empirical results, from measurements and causes to correlates and determinants, however the ways in which these empirical results can be integrated into broader theoretical narratives (within sociology and social sciences more general) remain uncertain. This situation has led some to conclude that subjective wellbeing 'is often – and appropriately – viewed as an atheoretical research topic' (GEORGE 2010.332.), while others suggest that sociology, by contrast, is an academic discipline rich in theories relevant for wellbeing (KROLL 2011.). Moreover, sociologists could contribute to happiness studies by also considering the social conditions, as opposed to just an individualist position (common approach in positive psychology), as well as the inadvertent outcomes of implementing happiness research at policy level (BARTRAM 2011).

A number of studies refer to the increasing interest that scholars from different social sciences, especially psychology and economics have shown towards happiness and wellbeing research. At the same time, many of them suggest the need for a sociological response to the current literature, which is saturated with individualistic conceptualisations of happiness and biological views. In a review of developments in the sociology of mental health and illness, HORWITZ (2002) writes:

Psychologists have paid far more attention to positive states of mental health than sociologists [...]. They often assert that the environment can only create short-term fluctuations in

⁴ A phrase coined by Ruut VEENHOVEN (2006)

happiness, which is a stable individual or genetic trait [...]. It is time that sociologists met this challenge by examining the social determinants of positive states of well-being [...]. Happiness, no less than distress, ought to respond to changes in the social structure and culture (HORWITZ 2002. 148.).

Due to the interdisciplinary characteristic of happiness studies, one could argue that sociologists would only add to the quantity of researchers in the field, and not make a distinctive contribution, however the argument is unconvincing, as there are many other interdisciplinary topics that sociologists study alongside other researchers and social scientists (BARTRAM 2011). Sociological accounts of happiness and of happiness studies not only fill gaps in the academic literature, but also have their place in contemporary societies, in public discourse, at policy level, and in political debates. Sociologists might be especially well suited to look into the ways in which people's perceptions of and actions on happiness vary, and analyse the observed variance with conventional sociological methods and tools – look at inequalities, power relations and other core sociological variables and concepts (ILLOUZ 1997; AHMED 2010). Furthermore, since 'individual characteristics alone are unlikely to provide a satisfactory account of the variation in happiness across individuals' (Firebaugh and Schroeder 2009:808), sociologists are particularly well equipped to contribute to happiness studies given their traditional emphasis on social context (FRAWLEY 2015).

What sociology already does

The first two sections of this article looked at why sociology ignored, and how sociology can help the study of happiness. This section looks at how sociology already contributes to happiness research.

The economic and psychological approaches to happiness studies have largely informed the sociological research on happiness of the last two decades. FRAWLEY (2015) puts together a list of scholars in the field, classified according to their research interests. For research on correlates and contributors to happiness, Frawley identifies the work of BURT and ATKINSON (2011) on hobbies that lead to 'flow' – a concept first introduced by psychology professor Mihaly CSIKSZENTMIHALYI (1990); HSIEH (2011) on happiness, income, and the life cycle; Schnittker (2008) on genetic endowments; and FIREBAUGH and SHROEDER (2009) on money and social comparison. Others explored happiness levels in certain populations, mostly by conducting quantitative research, for example RADCLIFF (2005) on union members, and FREEDMAN et al. (2012) on older people with disabilities. And some scholars have looked at happiness and wellbeing in the context of health promotion, a topic of increasing importance – among others CAMERON et al. 2006; CROPPER et al. 2007; CARLISLE–HANLON 2007a, 2007b, 2008; HANLON–CARLISLE 2009; CARLISLE et al. 2009; and KOBAYASHI et al. 2011.

Apart from the work produced by the above-mentioned scholars, sociological research on happiness and wellbeing continues to be published in journals like *Social Indicators Research* and the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, which are 'niche' publications (FRAWLEY 2015), but also in special issues in more general or mainstream publications, such as the recent *Sociological Research Online* edited special issue on happiness studies (MAY 2014).

Extensive work has been done on determinants and correlates of happiness. One of the most researched areas includes correlations between income and happiness, an area influenced by studies in behavioural economics, which will be discussed in more depth in the remainder

of this paper. Other factors that influence happiness levels to a larger extent than income does include health, employment (specifically, the avoidance of unemployment), marriage or stable intimate partnership, religiosity and sociability (BARTRAM 2011); cross-sectional studies would often give different results than longitudinal studies. Married people or those living together with a partner in a stable relationship are happier than single people, however as people are different, for some marriage can lead to a long-lasting increase in happiness (LUCAS et al. 2003), while for others happiness can decline after the initial stages of the relationship and sometimes return to the pre-relationship happiness level (HELLIWELL 2003). Unemployment is one of the strongest predictors that correlate inversely with happiness levels (CLARK-OSWALD 1994; LUCAS et al. 2004). And religiosity can also influence happiness, however being moderated by a social context (BARTRAM 2011), and it is mostly conducive to happiness for those people who have a strong religious identity (LIM-PUTNAM 2010).

In terms of key demographics, there are few that make 'unambiguous independent contributions to happiness models' (BARTRAM 2011.8.). Bivariate analyses show that women are on average happier than men, but the difference in happiness tends to be insignificant in other more complex analyses, depending on the control variables (DOLAN et al. 2008). Age also correlates with happiness levels, and a large number of studies show a U-shaped relationship, meaning happiness declines in early adulthood, and then increases after middle age. In recent years, several scholars (SAFI 2010; BARTRAM 2011) have expressed an interest in the effect that migration has on happiness levels and found that immigrants tend to be less happy than natives; this phenomenon is difficult to explain due to it not being a straightforward causal relationship, so it can be either because migrants have unrealistic expectations about life in their new country, or because these people already experience lower happiness levels before migrating.

Apart from the key demographics, correlates and determinants reviewed in the above two paragraphs, researchers have investigated the effect of culture on happiness and wellbeing levels (SUH – OISHI 2004; OISHI et al. 1999; UCHIDA et al. 2004; LU – GILMOUR 2004). Most studies in this area imply broad distinctions along the individualist-collectivist axis (European/American versus East Asian). In individualist societies, happiness is dependent on variables like personal achievement and self-esteem, while in collectivist societies, happiness is defined in terms of the wellbeing of the *group* (of the family or of a close social circle) and of interpersonal connectedness.

The existing research includes many other aspects than those covered in this article and the literature is continually expanding in social sciences in general, but also in sociology in recent years. To look at some of findings in more depth, the next section looks at contributions from scholars in the discipline of behavioural economics, particularly at the Easterlin paradox and at the concept of utility in the context of happiness and wellbeing research.

Happiness economics

Contributions of the discipline

One of the most notable areas of interest to emerge from *the happiness movement* (both within academia and outside) has included correlations with wealth, measurements of economic progress and its potential detrimental consequences at societal level. These concerns have been taken into consideration by a sub-discipline in economics, namely *behavioural economics* (not equated, but sometimes referred to as *happiness economics* or *the economics of happiness*).

In economics, the ‘rediscovery’ of the concept of happiness can be traced back to a 1971 essay by Brickman and Campbell, titled *Hedonic Relativism and Planning the Good Society* (BRUNI – PORTA 2007). In their essay, Brickman and Campbell coined the term ‘hedonic treadmill’ (also known as hedonic adaptation) which describes the human tendency to go back to an initial and fairly stable level of happiness despite the impact of major positive or negative episodes in their lives. The ‘hedonic treadmill theory’ (developed later by British psychologist Michael Eysenck) accounts for one of the most common concerns in the field, namely that ‘money does not bring happiness’, and is based on the observation that as one’s earnings increase, so do their expectations and wishes, and so there can be no lasting increase in happiness. Referring to Brickman and Campbell’s essay, Bruni and Porta considered it to be ‘the starting point of the new studies on happiness in relation to the economic domain’ (BRUNI – PORTA 2007. xiv.).

A significant part of the social scientific corpus of literature on the measurement and correlates of happiness has been established in the discipline of behavioral economics. Some of the prominent academics in this discipline are economists Richard EASTERLIN (1974, 2001, 2010), known for the Easterlin paradox, Richard LAYARD (2005), whose work focused on the influence of better mental health on social and economic life, and the significance of non-income variables on aggregate happiness, Andrew OSWALD (1994) who has looked at economic and social determinants of happiness and mental health, and Bruno FREY (2002) whose main interest was in the application of economic tools to happiness and wellbeing. Likewise, other social scientists also brought contributions to happiness economics, among them psychologists Martin SELIGMAN (2002, 2011) and Daniel KAHNEMAN (1999, 2006), who in fact won the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, and sociologist Ruut VEENHOVEN (1991, 2004, 2006). The cross-disciplinary contributions to the economics of happiness can be justified given that it ‘combines the techniques typically used by economists with those more commonly used by psychologists. It relies on surveys of the reported well-being of hundreds of thousands of individuals across countries and continents.’ (GRAHAM 2005. 41.).

Contemporary research into social indicators for the monitoring of societal progress has drawn attention to the importance of happiness and wellbeing measures at a national level to complement the more traditional economic measures like GDP (HYMAN 2011). Following the example of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness, the UK has too developed its own Measuring National Wellbeing programme. Concurrently, a significant number of organisations are now promoting or researching happiness and wellbeing in the UK (the first country in the Western hemisphere to implement a complementary index to GDP – The Wellbeing Index – for measuring societal ‘progress’). Comparable to Martin Seligman’s activity in the USA, in the UK, Richard Layard has further popularised the idea that measures of what makes a good society should include, apart from those on economic growth, conceptions of wellbeing (CIESLIK 2013). In consequence, Layard’s work has influenced the activity of several organisations⁵ in the UK, and has encouraged them to develop ways of measuring wellbeing and of talking about happiness to others.

Concerns about GDP measurements of ‘progress’ (LAYARD 2005, EASTERLIN 1974, OSWALD 1997) shape one of the focal points of interest in the economics of happiness, with economists identifying a phenomenon that describes no correlation, and sometimes inverse correlation between increasing material wealth and happiness. This phenomenon, which was described as a paradox by Richard Easterlin in 1974, is now known as the ‘Easterlin Paradox’ and is based

⁵ Organisations such as Action for Happiness and the New Economics Foundation (nef).

on the observation that income increases at national levels do not correspond to increases in happiness levels. The Easterlin paradox, described as ‘a touchstone of the literature’ (BARTRAM 2011. 6.) is part of the rationale behind the increasing interest in and the ‘need’ for happiness studies, and has also brought in debates about interventions at policy level. Richard Layard, for example, opens the first chapter in his book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* with

There is a paradox at the heart of our lives. Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier. (LAYARD 2005. 3.)

He then attests to the accuracy of his statement, writing,

This is no old wives’ tale. It is a fact proven by many pieces of scientific research. As I’ll show, we have good ways to measure how happy people are, and all the evidence says that on average people are no happier today than people were fifty years ago. Yet at the same time average incomes have more than doubled. (LAYARD 2005. 3.)

There are two statements worth taking into consideration here. The first one is the explanation of the paradox, by bringing awareness on the apparent discrepancy between people’s increasingly more comfortable lives and their set levels of happiness that seemed to not have changed despite these reasons. Used this way, the Easterlin paradox is becoming instrumental in discussions at policy level about introducing alternative measures for societal progress. And the second statement is notoriously prevalent today mostly in the media, but also in academic writing in positive psychology and economics, and consists of calling attention upon *research* that is *scientific*, brings *evidence* and showcases *facts* that are *proven* about a particular matter, in this case about the paradox. In the quote above, Layard uses all these key words (that I have italicised in the previous sentence), as they give credence to his arguments right from the very beginning of his book, which was written for a general readership.

If we were to isolate the Easterlin paradox to the discipline of economics, its influence in politics and policy would perhaps be justified, but the question of the ambivalence of progress is one of the most prominent themes in discussions of modernity (BULMAHN 2000). It is not just social scientists who have asked whether the individual can lead a happier life in modern society, but also artists, composers, poets and writers. Long before Easterlin, Émile Durkheim proposed,

But, in fact, is it true that the happiness of the individual increases as man advances? Nothing is more doubtful. (DURKHEIM 1960. 241.)

Durkheim, however, questioned this ambivalence by pointing to an essential difference between production, which can theoretically grow indefinitely and happiness, which is subjected to an upper limit. One other reason behind his logic is that considering how social change generally extends over multiple generations, some people who play a part in these social changes do not live long enough to benefit from those changes, if that were the case (FRAWLEY 2012). Thus, Durkheim argues against utilitarian approaches to human progress and, referring to the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity and to other social changes, like the division of labour, he writes that if these changes happened solely with the purpose to increase human happiness, then happiness

would have arrived at its extreme limit long ago, just as would have the civilization that has arisen from it, and both would have come to a halt,

moreover,

[a] moderate development would have been sufficient to assure individuals the sum-total of pleasures of which they were capable. Humanity would have rapidly come to a state from which it would not have emerged. That is what happened to animals; most have not changed for centuries, because they have arrived at this state of equilibrium. (DURKHEIM 1960. 241.)

An initial interest among social science academics to better understand human happiness and collect data on levels and determinants of happiness has rapidly spread outside academia, in politics, leading several national governments to want to have access to such measures and use them in the monitoring of societal progress. In the UK, in November 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron announced the implementation of subjective wellbeing indicators as complementary measures to GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Six months later, such measures were included in the ONS (Office for National Statistics) Integrated Household Survey, with the general expectations to measure, in utilitarian terms, ‘what matters most’, as Jil Matheson, the national statistician at the time, said

[w]e must measure what matters – the key elements of national well-being. We want to develop measures based on what people tell us matters most. (MATHESON 2010)

For the following section, I chose to look at the work of Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, in particular, as their 2002 book *Happiness & Economics* is the first to empirically connect happiness and economics, and also happiness and democracy. They discuss the extent to which utility and happiness are related and use findings from positive psychology, measurements of quality of life, sociological insights as well as data from political science.

Utility, happiness and subjective wellbeing

One of the central topics in the economics of happiness is that of *utility*, which is often associated with the idea that happiness is the ultimate goal of human life; this idea has been put forward by philosophers, but also by economists, starting with Aristotle who saw happiness as ‘the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence’, and William James who said ‘How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive for all they do’ (1902:76) and ending with contemporary economists, like Richard Layard, who propose the utilitarian principle of happiness as the end goal. For many, happiness is the only value that is final and sufficient, and everything else is just a means to an end. While there is a large degree of consensus among happiness economics on this matter, that happiness is the ultimate goal of human life, others disagree and see happiness as merely one of the components of ‘the good life’, and distinguish other goals as being as or more important. Some of these are virtue, justice, freedom, companionship, trust and absence of pain (FREY–STUTZER 2002).

The 1930s saw a total change in the concept of utility, along with the development of a new branch of economics, *new welfare economics*. This new discipline favoured ordinal utility instead of cardinal utility to explain individual choices, so utility was to be reflected in shown beha-

viour. A few decades later, economics witnessed another ‘dramatic change’, as Frey and Stutzer describe it, that marked the beginning of a movement based on the idea that ‘utility should be given content in terms of happiness, and that it can, and should be measured’ (FREY – STUTZER 2002. 20.). The authors identify four major developments that have been conducive to this change. The first one is based on the evidence that individual preferences and individual happiness differ, mainly because observed behavior cannot be explained by self-concerned preferences alone (as it was previously theorised).

The second development is based on the fact that economists have moved away from the dependency on nonsubstantive utility, and one of the main arguments, proposed by enterprising economist Tibor SCITOVSKY in his book *The Joyless Economy* (1976), was that most pleasures in life are not for sale, do not have a price and cannot be bought. Today the message that life’s pleasures are not for sale, paradoxically, sells in the happiness *industry* – especially when it comes to self-help or personal development.

The third development identified by Frey and Stutzer is linked to the advances in research on the concept and measurement of happiness made in psychology over the last six decades. The two authors argue that although there is virtually no connection between psychology and (theoretical) economics, the high level of rigour and empirical support that psychologists have shown in the study of happiness have made ‘the new idea of measurable utility palatable to at least some economists.’ (FREY – STUTZER 2002. 21.).

Finally, the fourth development comes from a bold claim in psychology, that people are generally not capable to choose the greatest amount of utility for themselves. One ‘exaggerated’ affirmation, as Frey and Stutzer consider it, that contributes to the claim comes from NISBETT – ROSS (1980. 223.) who wrote that ‘people do not know what makes them happy and what makes them unhappy’. To see what accounts for the discrepancy between substantive utility (meaning subjective wellbeing or happiness) and preference, Frey and Stutzer identify three types of reasons. Firstly there are contextual influences, i.e. when people compare themselves to others. Secondly, there are biases in cognition, which lead to asymmetries and thus people are prone to making distorted decisions. The authors distinguish four such biases: prospect theory, which explains a phenomenon where losses are more profoundly valued than gains of similar proportions; neglecting the actual duration, a phenomenon identified by KAHNEMAN – VAREY (1991) which explains that people rather focus on the intensity of pain, but not on how long they had endured it; the endowment effect (THALER 1980) which explains that people prefer a certain object for the sole reason that it is in their possession, over another object (the same or similar) that they do now own; and overoptimism, a bias that explains how people in trust that the outcomes of certain events are better for them than for other people (e.g. when people underestimate the probability of being involved in an accident or contracting a serious disease). Finally, the third reason why people are generally not capable to choose the greatest amount of utility for themselves is their limited ability to predict their own future and future tastes. Most people, for example, would rather die in an accident than lose both legs or both arms, however studies done on quadriplegics do not report significantly lower levels of happiness than those of healthy people.

Apart from the transition to new welfare economics and its focus on ordinal utility, the discipline of economics has invested an interest into reported subjective wellbeing and measurement methods and techniques. The ways in which subjective wellbeing can be captured were not developed within economics, but rather in psychology; there are four ways generally accepted: first, through physiological and neurobiological indicators (specifically, brain waves), though so

One of the most prominent measurements of subjective wellbeing uses multiple-item approaches and was developed by Diener and his colleagues. The 'Satisfaction with Life' scale uses five questions on a 1-7 scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree':

'In most ways my life is close to ideal.'

'The conditions of my life are excellent.'

'I am satisfied with my life.'

'So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.'

'If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.'

These types of single summary measures (present in the World Value Survey, the Eurobarometer, The ESS, the BHPS, and the Satisfaction with Life scale) successfully measure happiness levels (KAHNEMAN 1999). Psychologists and economists rely on such measures because they provide considerable intrapersonal stability and interpersonal comparability, which allows the measures to be applied without significant problems (FREY AND STUTZER 2002). Such measures, though, do not give insight into determinants of happiness, an area where psychology has made significant advances over the last two decades. FREY-STUTZER (2002. 10.) distinguish five categories of determinants of happiness: **1)** personality factors, like self-esteem, optimism, extraversion and neuroticism; **2)** socio-demographic factors (gender, education, marital status etc.); **3)** economic factors, such as unemployment and income; **4)** contextual and situational factors, such as living conditions, health and interpersonal relations; and **5)** institutional factors that comprise political participation rights, and the extent of political decentralisation.

These determinants however are characteristic of individualistic societies – the US, the UK, Western Europe, Australia. To a large extent, the existing literature does not take into account cultural factors when it comes to measuring happiness levels across nations, which raises issues of reliability and internal validity of the quantitative techniques and methods utilised. Furthermore, it is especially problematic when different large-scale surveys yield significantly different results across nations – Costa Rica is the world's happiest country according to the 'Happy Planet Index', while Denmark is the world's happiest country according to the 'World Happiness Report'.

Concluding comments

This article has reviewed some of the social scientific literature on happiness. It explored sociological contributions to happiness research and the extent to which the discipline of economics has played a part in the development of happiness studies.

Much of the initial academic literature on happiness focused on correlates of happiness and social indicators and adopted an inter-disciplinary approach to research. In predominantly quantitative studies, happiness and wellbeing have been correlated with personality traits (DENÈVE – COOPER 1998), with economic indicators at societal level (EASTERLIN 1974; FREY – STUTZER

2002), with major life changes like winning the lottery or becoming paralysed (BRICKMAN et al. 1978), with unemployment (CLARK – OSWALD 1994), with culture (OISHI – DIENER 2003; LU 2001) and with constituents of ‘the good life’ and ways of maintaining or boosting one’s levels of happiness (SELIGMAN 2011; LYUBOMIRSKY et al. 2005; CSIKSZENTMIHALYI 2002). Apart from correlates, research on social indicators (which gained popularity in the 1960s) followed a tendency to move beyond just economic indicators in the study of quality of life (ANDREWS 1989), and that indirectly lead to happiness and wellbeing becoming ‘politically fashionable’ (MARKS 2011. 22.).

Furthermore, there is very little intra- and inter-disciplinary consensus on concepts and terminology in the study of happiness, and no universally accepted definitions. In economics and psychology, happiness is used interchangeably with wellbeing and subjective wellbeing, and in the study of social indicators, the terms quality of life and life satisfaction are preferred. In media and populist literature, *happiness* remains the concept people like to use, arguably for its weight and impact, especially in Western societies (US, UK, Western Europe, Australia), but it is also the terminology of choice for some academics (like LSE Professors Paul Dolan and Richard Layard).

Finally, happiness remains an under-researched area in sociology, while other disciplines like economics and psychology have offered theoretical support towards their versions of happiness studies. Sociological theory could largely inform already existing accounts of happiness and wellbeing, and could therefore enrich the rather empirically-oriented field of happiness and wellbeing studies. *

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