

Should happiness-maximization be the goal of government?

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Abstract

Recent social surveys of happiness (subjective well-being) have given a new stimulus to utilitarian political theory by providing a statistically reliable measure of the ‘happiness’ of individuals that can then be correlated with other variables. One general finding is that greater happiness does not correlate strongly with increased wealth, beyond modest levels, and this has led to calls for governments to shift priorities away from economic growth and towards other social values. This paper notes how the conclusions of this research help to address some of the traditional objections to utilitarianism. The question of how happiness research findings can be used to set happiness-maximization goals for public policy needs careful examination, as the translation from research to policy is not always straightforward. Some empirical and ethical objections to this ‘new utilitarianism’ are raised. The complicating factors of public expectations of, and trust in, governments pose obstacles to any proposal that happiness research may lead to changes in public policy and hence to ‘happier’ populations.

Introduction

Recent research on happiness and subjective well-being has prompted a re-examination of the traditional utilitarian principle that the maximization of happiness should be adopted by governments as an aim of law and public policy. This is an old idea that reappears in various guises, for example:

Whatever the form or Constitution of Government may be, it ought to have no other object than the *general* happiness.

Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* [1790] (1996, 164).

A measure of government ... may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when ... the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.

Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1789] (Warnock, 1962, 33).

The US Declaration of Independence of 1776 specifies ‘the pursuit of happiness’ as one of the principal inalienable rights of all citizens. The 1942 Beveridge Report in the UK, which laid the groundwork for Britain’s welfare state, referred to ‘the happiness of the common man’ as the basic objective (Beveridge, 1942, 171). And, according to an influential, though Whiggish, history of New Zealand:

Social Security is ... clearly an investment in the future personnel of industry as well as in the happiness of the citizenry (Sinclair, 1991, 271).

For present purposes, I am mainly interested in that version of the happiness-maximization principle that has re-emerged from research on happiness in the fields of psychology, sociology and economics over the last three decades. To reiterate the question, then, this article asks whether the maximization of happiness *should* be adopted by governments as an aim of law and public policy. I emphasize the word *should*, moreover, because the theory that I am considering here involves an ethical case for a re-evaluation of social-political aims. Let me illustrate this with a few quotes from the recent happiness literature.

People can and do experience lasting changes in their well-being as a result of life events. *Appropriate public policies can increase the average level of subjective well-being*, and it is conceivable that individuals, with greater knowledge of the social mechanisms governing their lives, might themselves deliberately choose courses of action that would permanently improve their happiness (Easterlin 2003a, italics added).

. . . [P]ublic policy should be about enhancing happiness or the welfare of people, now and in the future (Ng and Ho 2006, 1).

. . . [T]he greatest happiness principle deserves a more prominent place in policy making (Veenhoven 2004, 676).

Veenhoven (2004) gives one of the most carefully considered examples of this case for the application of happiness research to public policy, based on what he calls a 'new utilitarianism'. He points out that a number of social factors over which governments have some authority and control (such as respect for the rule of law and civil rights, economic freedom, and tolerance of minorities) are positively correlated with popular happiness levels. He concludes that the happiness of a society could therefore be raised through the application of appropriate public policies, just as public health promotion requires appropriate policy actions.

Diener and Seligman (2004) put forward a well-researched case in favour of nations adopting systems of well-being indicators, partly to supplement existing economic indicators. They do not argue that such social indicators should serve a prescriptive function in the field of public policy. They see them as serving an evaluative role in assessing the impact or success of national policies, and hence their conclusion is more modest than Veenhoven's. In each case, though, the conclusion is based on retrospective data and on statistical correlations. We do not yet have prospective research that indicates a causal relationship between the implementation of a new policy and an effect on happiness.

The present discussion takes its impetus, then, from philosophical and social-research literature. Apart from the well-known examples of the Kingdom of Bhutan's policy of

Gross National Happiness and the reference in the US Declaration of Independence to ‘the pursuit of happiness’, governments around the world have so far not yet firmly established happiness as an over-arching goal or evaluative criterion of public policy in practical terms. So, the question posed here is a largely hypothetical one about the *possible* political applications of happiness research. It considers some of the pragmatics of public policy, and some of the ethical and empirical questions that have yet to be addressed by any proposal to use happiness research to directly inform policy-making. As such, this article does not seek to take a fixed stand one way or the other, but it considers the ‘pros and cons’, poses some critical questions, and seeks to stimulate future theory and research on this question.

So, what are some of the key conclusions of happiness research that are said to have some relevance for public policy? Diener and Seligman (2004) provide a useful literature review. Well-being surveys across nations have suggested that there are diminishing returns to incomes above US\$10,000 per annum. Further, once other health and social factors that also correlate with both affluence and subjective well-being are statistically controlled, “the effect of income on national well-being becomes nonsignificant” (Diener and Seligman 2004, 5). In fact, aggregate happiness-survey scores remained static in the USA and Japan, even after decades of strong economic growth; and the self-reported happiness of individuals does not increase into middle-age, even when incomes and wealth do. The communities with the highest subjective well-being or happiness are not, therefore, those who are the wealthiest, but rather those who enjoy good health, effective social and political institutions, high trust and social cohesion, and low corruption. More pertinent to matters of government and policy, Diener and Seligman (2004) review research reports that have found correlations between subjective well-being and countries’ respect for human rights and freedoms, democratic institutions and political stability.

Below, I introduce some reasons for interpreting such results with caution. But, at face value, they appear to carry a message for policy-makers whose goals may have been focused narrowly on economic growth as an objective and less concerned about health and social issues and about good governance. But, does it also mean that happiness surveys could become a tool for planning and evaluating public policy, and that happiness itself should be a *goal* of public policy and/or a means of assessing its success? To address this, we need a way of defining public policy, and of understanding its aims and methods and how these are chosen and enacted. We also need to consider the bridge between social research and policy actions, as this may not be as simple and unobstructed as it may at first seem. Does research simply quantify pre-existing social problems and test hypotheses about their causes for policy-makers then to digest the results and take appropriate actions; or is the process of research somehow constructive of social problems and thus actively shaping political concerns? But, before we do that, let us consider how happiness researchers define *happiness* itself.

How do researchers define *happiness*?

Statistical data about the happiness of populations come from various surveys. This is usually done in the form of questions about how happy or how satisfied with life the respondent feels. It is a question about *subjective* well-being, but the results tend to be fairly consistent and to correlate well with other measures of well-being factors. One might say that ‘happiness’ is whatever the survey respondents think it is when asked, but researchers often see a need to define the term. Authors in this field have provided definitions that are quite diverse. Layard defines *happiness* as ‘feeling good – enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained’ (2005, 12); and Myers calls it ‘a high ratio of positive to negative feelings’ (2004, 522). These definitions of happiness are the simplest, based on positive feelings, and are the closest to the traditional Benthamite meaning. Others take a slightly broader view, using the term ‘subjective well-being’ to encompass both an affective evaluation of oneself at present, as well as a rational evaluation of satisfaction with one’s life a whole. Frey and Stutzer point out that surveys can measure such subjective well-being, and that these measures ‘serve as proxies for “utility”’ (Frey and Stutzer 2002, 405).

Happiness, according to some psychologists, needs to be broken down into three strongly correlated, but independent, factors: subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and absence of depression or anxiety. Subjective well-being is the moods or feelings that people have of joy or elation. Life satisfaction refers to qualities or circumstances of life, such as personal wealth, family relationships, community participation, employment, goal achievement etc., that may cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction. And, finally, the absence of depression, anxiety, insecurity, etc. does not in itself constitute happiness or well-being, but is nonetheless an important prerequisite (Argyle 2001).

There is another definition of happiness that deserves attention here, because it has been developed in the context of a discussion that addresses the same question as the present paper: the relevance of happiness to the aims of government. Veenhoven, who advocates a ‘new utilitarianism’ and argues that happiness can be promoted by public policy, defines happiness as ‘the overall enjoyment of your life as a whole’ (2004, 664). This sounds more like Aristotelian *eudaimonia* than Benthamite utility. In fact, the quote comes from a chapter in a volume on ‘positive psychology’ which explicitly seeks its historical and philosophical roots in Aristotelian ideas about character and virtue, and hence advocates a eudaimonic approach to ‘the good life’ – in which happiness (as good feelings or satisfaction with life) would be only one dimension alongside ‘authenticity’, ‘continuous development’ and ‘the meaningful life’ (Jorgensen and Nafstad 2004).¹

So, while each of the definitions of happiness may be sound enough in its own right, the happiness literature in economics and psychology proposes diverse definitions deriving from well-established, but rival, philosophical positions. Are we talking about subjective feelings of pleasure, as balanced against pain – or are we using the term in reference to a broader moral evaluation of ‘a good life’? Clearly, the happiness research field has diverging definitions of its key term, but this may be seen as a healthy diversity of opinion, rather than a fundamental flaw. And both the eudaimonism of the Aristotelian

tradition and the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill have one significant thing in common: they both hold up the potential for the realization of happiness/eudaimonia as an ultimate goal, achievable in *this* worldly life. It is neither an abstract ideal, nor something to be hoped for in an after-life. And both traditions have proposed that happiness is relevant to the ethics and goals of the individual and of the state.

The matter would become even more complicated if one were to include non-western concepts of happiness. Bhutan, which has adopted the policy of Gross National Happiness, is officially a Buddhist state with a Buddhist concept of happiness (Mancall 2004). Buddhism advocates a detachment from worldliness as a means to overcome suffering and to achieve enlightenment; and it is not really about individual happiness as an immediate or transient experience. By contrast, western utilitarianism and eudaimonism tend to be more oriented towards achieving life-satisfaction or pleasure in the world as we know it empirically.

What is public policy?

So, while both eudaimonism and utilitarianism see happiness as an ultimate goal for the individual, they both also extend this goal, by aggregation, to the political community as a whole. In his *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the state exists to ensure the survival of its members, but, more than that, it also exists to achieve ‘the good life’ (*eudaimonia*). In a similar vein, Bentham says that the actions of governments can be evaluated in terms of the aggregate effects they have on people’s happiness. Both assume that the goals of the state can be inferred from the goals of its members, by aggregation.

It should be noted at this point that some other prominent thinkers have rejected happiness as an ethical-political goal. Kant did not dismiss the importance of happiness, but he did not see it as a suitable guide to moral reasoning, as it is too self-regarding. He preferred instead a deontological approach as expressed in his categorical imperative. More recently, Amartya Sen (1985) has extensively critiqued happiness and utilitarian ethics in relation to development policy, and he advances a theory of capabilities instead.

Nonetheless, contemporary happiness researchers promote happiness as a political goal based on correlations between social and institutional factors, over which governments have some control or influence, and subjective well-being. The latter, moreover, has been associated with other well-being factors, such as good health and longevity. Although real-world governments do not have ‘Ministries of Happiness’, it would appear logical to argue that, in as much as public policy can influence people’s happiness, governments have (at least) an *interest* in maximizing it – if not a moral *obligation* to do so. By this view, a low level of subjective well-being among some populations is as much a ‘problem’ for policy-makers as, say, poor public hygiene would be, even if it may require less urgent attention. And thus hypothetically a suitable happiness objective needs to be set, and policy programmes put in place to achieve it. The UK Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, for example, considered a paper on life-satisfaction and happiness research in 2002. This discussion paper concluded that there is ‘a case for state intervention to boost life

satisfaction due mainly to evidence of direct impacts on life satisfaction of government activities, together with strong evidence of the dependence of individuals' wellbeing on the actions of others' (Donovan and Halpern 2002, 4).

Such a case relies upon a rational-instrumental model of public policy. It maintains that scientific evidence of social conditions and problems is objective and that it leads logically to proposals for remedies. The job of the policy analyst is to examine alternative courses of action and to advise political decision-makers on the most economical or cost-effective option. This assumes that implementation of such a remedy is a technical process that has reasonably predictable outcomes, *and* that governments have the authority and the means to carry out the desired programmes. When it comes to something as inoffensive and universally desirable as happiness, moreover, how could anyone rationally object? Social researchers and policy technocrats could rule, provided we know it is making people happier.

Even if one cannot object to happiness *per se*, the instrumental model of public policy that would see happiness research as translatable unproblematically into policy programmes, and hence into social outcomes, is not the only way in which to consider the role of policy. A second model of public policy could be called 'interactionist'. This considers the complex set of institutions and actors that form and perform policy as a system, with subsystems and feedback processes. By this model, policy involves more than just routinely-acting and stable hierarchies, but depends also on the complex and less predictable effects of changeable networks and complex governance structures, some of which occur outside the scope of state authority. For example, Rhodes (1996) talks about 'governance as self-organizing networks' operating across organizations in private enterprise, civil society and central and local government. These networks challenge rational, hierarchical models of government because they 'become autonomous and resist central guidance' (p. 667). Policy objectives from the centre may be modified, renegotiated, or even resisted, on such terrain. Such a model would place a notion like happiness onto complex and contestable territory. So any liberal-democratic polity would then need to consider how the ideal of happiness may be expressed within diverse communities, be they secular or fundamentalist, mainstream or minority-group, etc. Individual and cultural differences in values and policy priorities regarding *how* people achieve happiness or 'a good life' would thus come to be relevant, and contestable, matters in such a policy-making process.

A third approach to public policy could be called the 'constructivist' model. By this model, the political process of 'problem-formation' is itself treated critically as problematic (e.g. Dean and Hindess 1998). Hence, social conditions are not simply objective states waiting passively to be measured by social researchers for the information of policy-makers. Rather, the surveying of communities, especially concerning something as subjective as happiness, actively constructs the awareness of the phenomenon, and hence pre-forms the framework in which it may be treated as a 'problem' that legitimates political attention and governmental actions. The constructivist approach is then also concerned with the ways in which policy instruments give effect to programmes that normalize certain predictable or calculable patterns of behaviour in the

interests of, say, safety, financial prudence, healthy eating, or indeed happiness and well-being. Such a perspective takes a critical view of the power relations and strategies that enact programmes of problem-formation and normalization, treating them as interested and contingent, rather than as neutral and necessary. By this approach, then, one may ask how happiness research, once released into the domain of political actions, is actively *reconstructing* our understanding of our own well-being as a ‘problem’ that requires collective efforts and powers to address it; and also how the resultant debates and practices may serve to redirect values and behaviours into normative patterns. For example, a presumed governmental duty to maximize happiness could become implicitly an individual duty to be happy – and hence this may imply a moral failure in those who fall short of that, due to not following socially prescribed norms, and hence elicit a range of new constraints and imperatives around the lives of citizens who are construed as ‘autonomous’, but whose ‘well-being’ is taken to be a collective concern.

My impression is that happiness researchers – like many other researchers in social sciences and public health – tend to assume the rational-instrumental model of public policy. The above discussion of alternative models does *not* invalidate the instrumental model in practice, though, and I am not privileging any one of them. After all, one would still expect well-formulated policies to have some rational grounding in evidence, to have clear instrumental goals with authoritative backing, and to be performed by regulated systems that seek to achieve those goals. But the alternative models do call us to exercise, at the very least, some caution and modesty about understanding the complexity and subtlety of policy processes and their origins and outcomes. They help us to understand how sometimes well-intentioned political programmes can come to grief through public misunderstanding and opposition, or how some critical reflexivity may be required in order to fully appreciate the complex and *political* nature of apparently technical processes of public policy.

To illustrate the complexity of the relationship between research findings and their application to policy, consider the case of obesity as a social problem. Obesity is a major concern for all affluent nations, it has well-known health risks, and it has worrying cost implications for governments and health-care systems. It would appear to be a simple matter to translate the mass of scientific evidence into effective public policy. After all, unfettered food production and consumption in affluent societies is only resulting in higher rates of obesity; so governments should take action where markets have failed. All they have to do, it would seem, is to encourage people to change their diets and to get more exercise. But the reality is much more complex than that. Policy-makers are confronted with competing theories, complex and cross-cutting issues, huge vested interests, ideological disagreements, a multitude of possible interventions, and frequent resistance to perceived government ‘interference’. Despite the growing sophistication of publicly available knowledge about obesity and its prevention, the rates of obesity seem not to decline (Lang and Rayner 2007).

The skeptical note that this introduces is *not* meant to imply that either obesity-reduction or happiness cannot or should not be a goal of public policy. It is only to suggest that the translation from social research into effective political action is often fraught with

complexity and frustration. The next sections of this paper take up the theme mainly from the point of view of utilitarian prescriptions for governments, rather than the Aristotelian perspective – partly to simplify and to shorten the discussion, but also to recognize that the utilitarian approach appears to be the more common in the happiness research literature, especially among economists. The points arising from this discussion will show that the case for happiness as a goal of good government does run into complications, in the light of ethical and empirical issues.

The ensuing discussion will largely assume that public policy takes place in the environment of a developed nation with a good standard of governance, although the situation of developing or less stable countries will be taken into account when necessary.

Traditional objections to utilitarianism

The findings of happiness research represent an interesting development in utilitarian thought. Now, utilitarianism has become a diverse set of doctrines, and has had to adapt to numerous problems. One of the basic problems was that utility, being subjective and having no basis for interpersonal comparison, could not be measured. So, the Benthamite principle of utility (based on ‘the greatest happiness’) was, for the purposes of economics, stripped of its subjectivism by Samuelson’s principle of ‘revealed preference’. This meant that preferences are not regarded in subjective terms, but defined purely by the behavioral choices that consumers make in a market. This led some policy-makers to the idea that measures of aggregate economic output or income could be used as proxies for the welfare of the people, as if greater consumption implicitly means greater happiness. (That is, if we get more of what we prefer, we must be better off.) It appears that this simple equation is no longer taken literally. United Nations guidelines on national accounts, for example, point out that GDP is an *economic* indicator, should *not* be used to stand for ‘well-being’, and is *not* supposed to represent directly the ‘utility’ that people may (or may not) derive from the consumption of goods (United Nations Statistics Division 2007). So, let us assume that utilitarianism, in the field of public policy, is not necessarily about the reduction of public values to economic statistics – and hence that happiness research may now have something useful to add to political deliberation and policy decision-making.

Furthermore, while Bentham had a theory about calculating and maximizing happiness, but lacked any interpersonally comparable data, contemporary happiness researchers might claim that social surveys now supply data that is reasonably reliable and valid, thus filling that gap. Veenhoven (2004), for example, argues that happiness surveys are valid and reliable measures, and that the construct of happiness that the surveys are using is interpersonally and cross-culturally comparable. Hence, this research literature may be seen as giving new stimulus to utilitarianism. Although some, especially in the American ‘positive psychology’ movement, as pointed out above, appear to take a more eudaimonistic approach to happiness, it is assumed here that contemporary happiness research is predominantly utilitarian in its philosophical foundations. From a political point of view, it leads us to the conclusion that the results of happiness research, based on

social surveys and multi-variate analyses, provide evidence of the personal, social and economic conditions that are most likely to maximize happiness. This seems to result in a form of rule-utilitarianism which says that, if governments adopt certain policies and institutional practices, then people will be happier.

The precepts and prescriptions of contemporary happiness research have succeeded in overcoming some of the traditional objections to the political applications of utilitarianism. Relevant authors argue that happiness, as a mental state, is now measurable and can be enhanced through appropriate actions (Layard 2005; Veenhoven 2004), and so happiness surveys, results from which are now quite widespread and available globally, provide the ability to observe and aggregate – and hence potentially to predict and even to enhance – people’s happiness. Below, I place in italics some common objections to utilitarianism, and immediately following is the kind of response that happiness researchers can plausibly give in reply.

Objection 1: So long as the person is ‘happy’ – even if it requires the administration of opiates – it does not matter if she is illiterate and malnourished.²

Happiness surveys find that greater happiness is correlated with good health, longevity and higher levels of educational achievement, and so it supports the pursuit of a wider range of well-being and development factors (see for example Easterlin 2003b), and the spectre of a starving, yet ‘happy’, person is nothing but a ‘straw man’ in this argument. Further, it is sensible to suppose that policies with a happiness goal may be quite different in a country where illiteracy and malnourishment are widespread compared with a country where unmet needs are not as ‘basic’ and which is instead concerned more with social inclusion in the context of material prosperity. It is thus unfair to attribute to happiness research literature a narrow subjectivism, devoid of interest in objective and variable social conditions.

Objection 2: ‘The greatest happiness’ of the majority may be sought by means that produce misery for a minority, or that at least involve some trade-off between people, in a way that violates our understandings of human rights or moral principles.³

Happiness research findings may suggest that the greatest gains in aggregate happiness can be made by attending to the well-being of society’s worst-off, especially those who are poor (by progressive taxation and redistribution, and by employment security) and those with mental illness (by improving mental health services) (Layard 2005). Furthermore, democratic societies that respect universal human rights tend to have happier people (Diener and Seligman 2004).⁴

Objection 3: ‘Happiness’ as an ultimate goal lacks adequate normative content, so a person may justify, say, gambling, taking drugs or spending his savings on the grounds that it makes him as happy as, or happier than, he would be if saving for retirement and adopting a healthy lifestyle.⁵

Happiness research (for example Easterlin 2003b) does inquire into which happiness-altering circumstances or behaviours avoid the effects of ‘adaptation’ (a short-term boost in happiness, after which there is no long-term benefit), and hence can reach conclusions that reflect upon more ‘sustainable’ gains in well-being.

But, while the conclusions about social and political values that may be derived from happiness research can possibly withstand some of the standard objections to utilitarianism, there are other obstacles in the way of drawing the conclusion that these research results (regardless of how rigorous they may be) *should* be applied to public policy. To make this case, we can explore some logical, philosophical problems, as well as some potential empirical grounds that may lead us to ask whether public policy can achieve any further gains in happiness (as reflected in surveys).

The proposition that happiness should become an aim of public policy relies on two main types of assumption: an ethical assumption about political obligations, and an empirical assumption about effectiveness. The ethical assumption is basically that, because we have statistical analyses that show the conditions under which people are most likely to say that they are happy, then we *ought* to use collective political means to maximize those conditions. The empirical assumption is that, by having governments make the policy reforms that appear to be needed, happiness-survey responses will improve. I will examine each in turn.

Some ethical issues

The ethical claims for happiness as a political goal are often premised on the notion that happiness is a universally understood and desired goal. For Richard Rorty (1999), for example, the goal of giving all people ‘an equal chance of happiness’ is of prime importance and has an *a priori* status for which there are no rational, empirical or supernatural grounds. It is simply ‘a goal worth dying for’, about which there can be no further argument. While it may be true that all languages contain words like the basic idea of happiness as ‘good feelings’ (Wierzbicka 1999), however, the supposedly ‘self-evident’ idea that happiness is something all humans universally want may only be self-evident in the sense of being tautological. Happiness is defined as a good or desirable state and hence, purely by definition, it is good, or all desire it. Hence, the statement ‘happiness is a universal good’ is quite circular, and no more informative than saying ‘pain always hurts’.

We may be able to get a little further, though, by stating the conditions which appear to lead to a higher frequency of reports of high levels of happiness – just as it helps to know what is most likely to cause pain, so that we can avoid such things. Now, a common problem with any simplistic version of utilitarianism is the desire to leap from the possession of such facts to the claim that we *ought* to do something. So, while it may be perfectly ‘natural’ – an observable fact of human behaviour – that we take steps to make our lives happier and to avoid pain, it should not automatically be assumed that this can be used as a fundamental principle of ethics. Certainly, those happiness researchers who

use their empirical findings as premises for an ethical and political case may be guilty of overlooking the extra logical steps needed. They generally do not stop to argue why the achievement of higher aggregate scores on happiness surveys is *good* (given that it would be circular simply to say that this result would be ‘good’ because it would signify that people are happier). The *fact* that we want to be happy does not ineluctably lead to the conclusion that happiness-maximization should be our *ethical* guide. Indeed, there are respectable branches of moral philosophy that argue that it should *not* be, and instead principles such as freedom, human rights, duties, virtue, capabilities or fairness may be more relevant.

I will not try to settle this particular philosophical debate, but simply present it as a problem worth considering. The grounds for happiness get marshier, however, when we examine another common assumption in the happiness research literature. This is the ‘leap’ involved in proceeding from matters based upon personal subjective feelings to matters of collective political decision-making. Happiness is subjective, and refers to feelings of pleasure and satisfaction with life that can only be directly experienced by a person privately. Hence, we have to be cautious about the scope of reference appropriate to the word *happiness*. I can comment as the expert on my own happiness, and can share empathetically in the happiness expressed by someone else who is close to me. So, it may even be meaningful to assert ‘we are happy’, if the ‘we’ is inclusive of people close enough to share each other’s feelings. But does the statistical aggregation of many anonymous individuals’ estimation of their own private feelings of happiness amount to something that is simply the sum of its parts? Or, is the well-being of the whole something *more* than the net-sum ‘well-beings’ of its members?

It is clearly feasible to ask individuals to rate their own happiness numerically, and we can aggregate and analyze those responses statistically. But, a large collection of people is not the subject of happiness. Happiness, as an experience, or as something expressed verbally or non-verbally, does not apply to more than one person at a time – or, at best, to no more than a close group of persons. Any expression of personal happiness, moreover, is mediated by factors unique to each context, such as a survey respondent’s interpretation of the questioner’s motives for asking about happiness, or willingness to disclose feelings to strangers. Aggregated scores from national surveys of happiness, therefore, may not be the best way to estimate the well-being of Belgian or Japanese *society* – because whole societies are not the grounds upon which the feeling of happiness has content or practical meaning.⁶

Coming back to the ethical issues, then, a similar problem applies in moving from matters of individual choice to matters of social or political choice. Even if I accept that happiness can form a guide to my own ethical reasoning and decision-making, it is quite another matter to generalize this to a category to which happiness may not properly apply (that is, a whole society). As John Rawls put it, ‘[utilitarianism] improperly extends the principle of choice for one person to choices facing society’ (Rawls 1999, 122), and the same critique may be applicable to happiness survey findings if applied to collective political decision-making. Even if we assumed that happiness is the ultimate personal goal, happiness does not automatically become the ultimate *political* goal.

Communities do not feel happiness, only individuals feel it. So, while it may behove one person to act in a certain way to see to his or her own happiness, the 'happiness' of a whole collective or community of persons may be empty of content or reference, and there may be no obvious pathway to improving happiness at that level of action. Two different people may find satisfaction in customs or policies that are diametrically opposed to one another. (Think about the legality of prostitution in one community versus the 'freedom' to have child brides in another.) So aggregations of happiness scores may elide underlying social and political conflicts, and hence happiness surveys may *not* always be useful in guiding real-world political decisions about how the law should treat various behaviours.

There is a further logical argument that advocates of happiness-maximization need to make which bridges this gap between the individual level, at which happiness (as an experience and as an ethical precept) may make sense, and the collective level at which public policy actions occur, the level of whole communities and populations. The case would need to be made that the goals of a nation can be viewed simply as the net-sum of the happiness-maximization goals of the millions of individuals who inhabit it. In other words, the whole is simply the sum of its parts, and the ethics of state action are to be determined by the aggregated desires of individuals.

Even if we were persuaded that happiness surveys *are* relevant information for public policy (which they may yet be), they would not overcome the basic ethical-political problems of the policy-making process. No matter how much information is produced to show under what social conditions people report greater happiness, these conclusions, on their own, can have no morally compelling basis for the actions of governments. Indeed, some would argue that happiness, while of paramount importance, is rightly the concern of the individual (including loved ones), but *not* of government. Happiness is a private value, not a public one; and many of the key factors associated with happiness (such as social connectedness and health) may rely more on private choices than on public policy. The neo-liberal suspicion of Big Government, or Nanny State, is likely to be scornful of any well-intentioned 'therapeutic' effort to lend the powers of the state to the 'problem' of helping us to be happier (Furedi 2006). The obligations of government, it is often argued, are merely to preserve the liberties of the individual. (This is a libertarian standpoint and I will not presently defend it, however.) Further, though, there are other principles for social decision-making, such as Rawls's justice as fairness, or Sen's theory of capabilities, against which happiness-maximization has to justify itself as an equal, if not superior, guide. So, even if we can claim that people in well-governed societies report higher levels of happiness, we have not yet established that happiness is the *aim* of good government.

In fact, happiness has been used by political ideologies ranging from utopian socialist to social-democratic to libertarian, each with its own programme for political, social and economic reforms, and with policy objectives that conflict with one another. Claiming that happiness is *the* goal of good government and that we have scientific evidence about what makes people happier, therefore, does not actually help us to solve the problem of

divergent social values and policy objectives. Happiness research can be used persuasively and ideologically for diametrically opposed political aims and does not provide us with a set of recommendations that over-ride political antagonisms and public debate. One may claim that happiness is the goal of good government, as Tom Paine did, but that leaves us back at square one when it comes to arguing about how best to maximize happiness in terms of many practical policy choices. In short, evidence about happiness does *not* trump political opinion-formation and public debates about core social values (Duncan 2007). But it may at least *inform* our public debates with empirical data, as Diener and Seligman (2004) suggest.

Some empirical questions

Having considered some ethical questions so far, what then of the empirical issues that bear upon the idea that governments should act to maximize happiness?

The ‘Easterlin paradox’ is based on the empirical finding that growing markets have not been associated with growth in aggregate happiness-survey results. This normally is explained by ‘rising expectations’, and leads to calls for better public policy to restore the pursuit of happiness (Easterlin 1974, 2001). The effects of the acquisition of new material goods or enhanced income tend to be ‘self-limiting’, and do not lead to sustained gains in subjective well-being. Good health and social connectedness, on the other hand, appear to contribute more sustainably to people’s happiness than the pursuit of wealth and material goods (Easterlin 2003b), so governments should do more about the former things, for the sake of our happiness.

While this leads happiness researchers to claim that government should not focus too heavily on economic growth, they have not asked about the potential ‘unhappiness’ that might result from letting economies stagnate. Happiness research also tells us that high unemployment and job insecurity cause lower levels of happiness (Frey and Stutzer 2002), so the consequences of *not* pursuing economic growth may also be undesirable, if we accept the findings of the research.

Further, there may also be a ‘rising expectations’ effect around public services and policies – such that ‘better’ or ‘more’ public services would also lead to static happiness-survey findings, or even paradoxically to greater *discontent*. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that, as developed countries got wealthier, their public and regulatory services also improved – with massive benefits for health, education and public safety. In most advanced industrial nations, the post-War decades saw rising incomes as well as rising social well-being, in part brought about by improved public policy and technical improvements in public services, such as public health systems – paid for by growing economic output. This resulted in measurable well-being improvements in longevity, infant mortality, educational participation and achievement, public hygiene and safety regulations, etc. And yet, happiness surveys remained static over that period in many countries, including the USA, for which we have data going back to 1946 (Veenhoven 2007). In other words, while Easterlin warned us that rising wealth did not correlate with

rising happiness, one must note that rising social well-being and expanding public services (over the same decades) also did not correlate with rising happiness. Perhaps the problem is that, as public services in health, education, etc. improved, public expectations of what governments can and should deliver also rose accordingly, leading people to feel no more satisfied or happy than they did before. And so the citizen fails to see him- or herself as a participant in genuine social progress.

Richard Sennett noted this effect from his experience working with the New Labour government in the UK. While he described that government as genuinely progressive, he also observed that it had a tendency to take a short-term 'consumerist' approach to policy – ever striving to produce new policies for the consumer-citizen and 'abandoning them as though they have no value once they exist'. The beneficiaries of the policies failed to credit the politicians with the achievement of progress; the politicians blamed the public for being 'ungrateful'; and the Opposition accused the Government of being 'out of touch' (Sennett 2006, 176). The danger may lie in regarding politics and public policy as if we were consumers of 'products' or 'brands'. Viewing the democratic policy-making process in terms of whether a specific programme of action may 'make me happier' is only going to make that consumerist mentality stronger.

There are some – but only a few – developed countries whose surveys have shown long-term trends towards higher levels of happiness (if we can take the survey results literally for the moment). Notable for this are Denmark and Italy. Meanwhile, Belgium had gradually declining happiness scores, and Great Britain's were static (Veenhoven 2007). But, it is not yet clear what the governments of Denmark and Italy may have been doing, and the governments of Belgium and Great Britain *not* doing, to have contributed to these trends. In the case of Belgium, internal disunity caused by differences between its constituent communities could well be a factor, and it is conceivable that 'better policy' could reduce that. National disunity also exists between northern and southern Italy (not to mention corruption and political instability in Rome) and yet happiness ratings seem to be on the rise there. Moreover, the Thatcher revolution made Britons neither more nor less happy. In light of these paradoxes, it may be more parsimonious to hypothesise that public policies have little at all to do with the trends in national survey results. It may be the case that better public policy does *not* result in greater happiness – at least in countries that already enjoy high levels of social well-being – as each improvement in the public services or in the social environment is met with rising public expectations, leaving people's sense of satisfaction or well-being more or less static.

The best evidence supporting the notion that governance and public policy have an effect on happiness comes from the negative cases, such as Russia, where political turmoil, economic failure and corruption since the collapse of communism appear to be correlated with low and declining surveyed happiness levels (Saris and Andreenkova 2001). In general, moreover, there are lower happiness results in those developing countries that suffer from economic hardship and political instability or human-rights violations compared with developing countries that are the most prosperous and that are democratic and stable. One would expect the individual happiness of Zimbabweans to rise after political and economic stability is restored there. But one does not need happiness

surveys to justify democratic elections in that country, nor in any other. So, the most one can say is that the failure effectively to govern a country may cause *unhappiness*. But from this one cannot claim either that better public policies in already well-governed, affluent countries will lead to greater happiness, or that ‘the greater happiness’ is a necessary or sufficient justification for good governance.

The case in favour of making happiness an aim of government needs also to take account of empirical trends in public attitudes towards government and political engagement in democracies. Surveys of trust in government consistently declined over recent decades in developed nations, though there is some uncertainty about how such public perceptions are related to the actual performance of government agencies (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003), and these results bear no correlation with well-being indicators (Killerby 2005). Furthermore, a common trend in western democracies is towards lower participation rates in elections, lower political-party membership rates, and less voter loyalty (or more voter volatility) (Mair 2006). The affluent democracies of the west are showing less trust in and commitment to political institutions and processes. This may be an unfortunate trend, but it is empirically grounded, and it lends no support to the idea that publics in the west will put their trust into governments and public officials in matters of maximizing the happiness of all citizens, even though there is still a reasonable expectation that relevant social and health services *ought* to be provided by government.

So, when thinking about the empirical effectiveness of any public programme aiming to maximize happiness, we need to ask whether governments are in a position to use their legitimate authority to this effect and to gain public consensus. Further, though, we would need to be assured that governmental actions *can* positively influence happiness, as measured by social surveys, and the evidence in favour of this proposition has yet to be gathered. We do have evidence that some of the institutional and social or economic factors over which governments do have some influence correlate with measured happiness; but this does not yet prove that reforms to public policy, beyond what has already been achieved in developed nations, will necessarily raise happiness levels. It may be that the relationship between happiness and public perception of good government is as paradoxical as that between economic growth and happiness. While happiness research may supply us with many useful results, one should *not* leap to the conclusion, as does Layard (2005), that there is now a ‘science’ of happiness that is capable of showing us how to reform our personal and *political* choices. The application of such findings to political aims and to public policy needs to take account of some of the complexities of the relationship between what governments do, in terms of public services, and how people feel about, or derive satisfaction from, their lives.

Conclusion

Happiness research, based principally on social surveys of subjective well-being, has given a new impetus to utilitarian prescriptions for good government. One of its most significant findings has been that, beyond poverty, the relationship between wealth and happiness is, at best, weak – and further that aggregate self-reported happiness does not

increase, in developed countries, as economies grow and as people get wealthier. Instead, a range of other variables correlate with changes in subjective well-being, including physical and mental health and social belonging. These findings have led to calls for happiness to be adopted as an aim (if not *the* aim) of government, and hence for public policy to be guided by happiness research.

It may, however, be wrong to conclude that happiness research findings can be translated directly into authoritative actions by governments, in the interests of the well-being of all members of society, other than to provide feedback on the social programmes that governments already deliver. Future debate about the politics of happiness would need to take into account the complexity of policy networks and processes, and the diversity of communities and their values, and to treat reflexively the questions of problematization and normalization that may underlie the apparently benign and innocuous prescription that happiness be the goal of good government.

While happiness research does overcome some of the traditional objections to utilitarian political theory, the case for its direct application to public policy is challenged when closely examined on ethical and empirical grounds. The utilitarian case for making happiness a guiding collective value is not as 'self-evident' as it may at first seem; and countervailing trends in rising public expectations of, and reducing trust in, governments and public services may be adding complexity to the scene in which any programme for maximizing happiness would have to take part.

Happiness research appears to support what Aristotle said: that you don't have to be rich to be happy and to live a satisfying life – though poverty is a major drawback. Growing economic productivity and personal material wealth in developed countries appear not to result in higher scores on happiness surveys. But, if this means that the growth of economies in the developed world has not caused much progress towards a post-Enlightenment objective of happiness-maximization, would governmental action succeed instead? I have raised some doubts about that, but conclusive evidence has yet to be produced. Public policy does not lend itself to controlled trials, but future evaluative research on the impact of policy reforms on happiness-survey results may assist us. Perhaps such prospective research on governmental effectiveness needs to be performed. In the meantime, I conclude that happiness-maximization, as a social goal, is not an obligation of government.

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¹ The eudaimonic approach to happiness research is given more thorough discussion in a recent issue of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* (issue 1, 2008).

² ‘If a starving wreck, ravished by famine, buffeted by disease, is made happy through some mental conditioning (say, via the “opium” of religion), the person will be seen as doing well on this mental-state perspective, but that would be quite scandalous’ (Sen 1985, 188).

³ A typical hypothetical example used here would be that of a surgeon who has five patients whose lives depend on organ transplants. Should he dissect, and hence kill, one person with healthy organs to save five others? To do so would appear to maximize utility, but is also fundamentally wrong. A real-world example comes from the Kingdom of Bhutan, which espouses a policy of Gross National Happiness, but in 1991 rescinded citizenship from, and then expelled, its Nepalese-Hindi minority – about 100,000 people – who continue to languish in refugee camps. At the time of writing, a group of these refugees was resettling in my own community. Can the forced expulsion of an unwanted minority be justified by the happiness of the majority?

⁴ This is perhaps being too generous to Diener and Seligman, however, as their review article does contain the assertion that ‘... market democracies have much more well-being than totalitarian dictatorships, so military expenditures that protect and extend

democracy will increase global well-being' (2004, 24). Published not long after the invasion of Iraq, this statement seems to be guilty of the kind of moral problem often associated with utilitarianism.

⁵ This is a version of one of oldest objections to utilitarianism. It may be put somewhat like this: Suppose playing tic-tac-toe gives me more pleasure than listening to Bach; then we would have to suppose that the former is of higher moral worth, in my case. There is something inherently wrong with this, and Mill struggled to get around the problem by arguing that, in the estimation of anyone with sufficient experience of both forms of pleasure, Bach would be the clear favourite. So, similarly, we might argue that anyone with sufficient experience and knowledge of both will see that saving one's money for retirement is morally superior, because it will bring greater *lasting* happiness, to spending one's money in a casino.

⁶ J.S. Mill commits all of the fallacies described above. He argues that, because people desire happiness, happiness is desirable. Since all this says is, 'happiness is desirable because people desire it', the so-called 'proof' is tautological. Further, the only reason he can give as to why people desire the 'general happiness' is that people desire their own happiness. Proceeding thus from a tautology, which he assumes to be a 'fact', he surmises that 'happiness is a good'; and because it is a good to each individual person, it must therefore be 'a good to the aggregate of all persons' (Mill, in Warnock 1962, 288–9). He does not stop to ask whether 'happiness' has any meaning beyond the subjective experience of one person at a time. However, he then proceeds to argue that ultimately we desire *only* happiness, because all other desirable things are desired only as a means to greater happiness. But the very premises of his case have to be dismissed. Furthermore, happiness suits his purposes as a super-ordinate goal partly because it is free of content and can thus be linked to any other desirable goals.