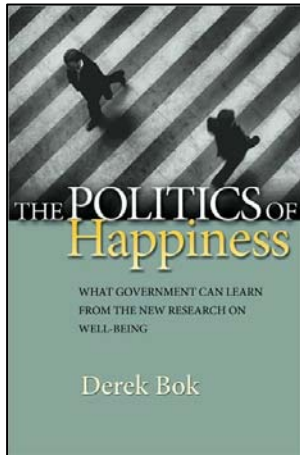




The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being

Author: Derek Bok

Publisher: Princeton University Press

Date of Publication: February 2010

ISBN: 9780691144894

No. of Pages: 272

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[Summary published by CapitolReader.com on May 6, 2010]

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About The Author:

Derek Bok is the 300th Anniversary Research Professor at Harvard University. He served as Harvard's 25th president from 1971 to 1991 and served as interim president from 2006-2007. Bok is also the author of *The State of the Nation* and *The Trouble with Government*.

General Overview:

The past 40 years have seen thousands of research studies about human happiness. These studies have asked specific questions about how health, family relationships, work, and religion impact individual happiness. The Gallup organization now conducts global surveys of happiness, comparing nations by how happy they are. One country, Bhutan, has actually made "Gross National Happiness" the "central aim of its domestic policy."

The Politics of Happiness explores how all this new happiness research could influence American governmental policy and improve the quality of life for all citizens.

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What Investigators Have Discovered

First, let's define what happiness is.

Ed Diener of the University of Illinois defines a person as happy if he or she experiences "life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger." In an unhappy person, the frequency of these two states of being are reversed.

One of the most often considered factors in determining happiness is level of income. Many people believe that simply having more money would likely equate to their being happier. However, it isn't this simple.

One specific result of these studies, however, is clear: "average levels of happiness in the United States are higher as one moves up the income scale."

At first blush, this fact seems to confirm that income plays a "major role in people's happiness." But questions arise in looking at further details of these studies. For example, average levels of happiness in America has not risen with per capita income levels, which have grown a great deal over the past 50 years.

Financial success is not the only factor for investigators to consider, of course.

Race appears to be the "prominent demographic factor that correlates strongly with happiness." Black Americans are considerably less happy with their lives than whites, although "the gap has been cut in half over the last 30 years."

Another major happiness factor is age, though not in the way most would assume. Older people are surprisingly happier than younger people, especially if free of serious health problems.

What aspects of life are most associated with lasting happiness?

1. Marriage
2. Social relationships
3. Employment
4. Perceived health
5. Religion
6. Quality of Government

The Reliability of Research on Happiness

Researchers have obtained data about happiness in two ways: general self-assessment (how happy are you?), and the day-reconstruction method. In this second method, the respondent recalls various things he or she did the previous day and describes their mood during each activity.

Retrospective evaluation – asking people a simple question of how satisfied or happy they are with their lives – is much more commonly used than the more involved “experience sampling” technique.

So how accurate is retrospective self-evaluation? After all, it’s a subjective measure of personal happiness, not something that can be tested or measured using a physical test like an x-ray or an MRI. It’s also important to recognize that respondents who are asked about their happiness may give inaccurate answers (for instance, people asked about their personal level of happiness on September 12, 2001 would likely give a “more pessimistic evaluation” than normal). Even significantly less drastic problems, like a headache, rainy day, or dentist appointment, can affect responses this way.

There are also cultural differences to consider. The measure of individual happiness in Latin America may be unrealistically high because of the cultural expectation that complaining is a negative personality trait.

Some studies have shown that people who claim to be mostly happy are “more likely to experience positive outcomes and less likely to experience unfavorable events.” They are more likely to live longer, have happy marriages, remain employed, etc.

It is important, however, not to confuse causation and correlation. The fact, for example, that marriage is significantly *correlated* to happiness does not necessarily mean that marriage *causes* happiness.

While happiness researchers still have much to explore and confirm in the growing body of information we have about happiness, the statistics gained from these studies are actually better grounded than many other statistical measures regularly employed by policy-makers. Over time, as more and more studies are performed and published, uncertainties regarding happiness research will diminish.

Should Policy-Makers Use Happiness Research?

Thinkers from Socrates to Sigmund Freud believed that happiness should be a focal point for government policy. A country’s government has much to gain from having happy citizens; people who are happy are more likely to be “healthy, happily married, effective in their jobs, and civic-minded, generous, and tolerant citizens.”

Despite the undoubted benefits of happiness, some may still argue that it isn’t up to the government to pursue policies to promote happiness.

Libertarians, for example, believe the government is run by mostly corrupt public officials who seek to control others and consolidate their own control, mostly to the detriment of individual liberty and happiness. However, in seeking to restrain the power of government, Libertarians are not answering the question of whether the government

should make happiness the center of policy – instead, they are “insisting that private ordering” is a better way to go about obtaining it.

Another, very different, argument against government attempts to improve its country’s happiness is founded upon a 1996 study by David Lykken and Auke Tellegen. Based on their research, the authors argued that about 80% of happiness is determined by genetics, and cannot be altered. In short, those who subscribe to this theory say that it is not up to the government, an organization, or even the individual himself or herself to become happier. Instead, you’re simply born with what determines your level of satisfaction with life.

While nearly all happiness researchers agree that genetics play an important role in determining personal happiness, most would argue that our genes are not wholly – or even mostly – responsible for whether we feel contented with our lives. Human intervention matters. The actions of a government do matter to the people.

This is not to argue that happiness should be the *only* goal of public policy. One obvious reason why is that the central tenets of American Constitutionalism require actions that make some (and sometimes even a significant minority of) Americans unhappy, such as desegregation or upholding freedom of speech in cases of bigots.

Happiness research can be very helpful in prioritizing government goals. For instance, if legislators are aware that millions of Americans are unhappy largely due to unmanaged chronic pain or mental illness, politicians may focus more on finding answers to some of these big problems.

When it comes to raising taxes, on the surface it may seem like this action would make no one happier. But happiness researchers could work with data to determine the net gains or losses of raising or lowering taxes and the resulting changes in services provided.

Finally, happiness research may cast light on institutional changes within the structure of government itself. A fascinating study by Bruno Grey and Alois Stutzer compared the happiness of Swiss citizens in the different cantons (towns) of Switzerland. The researchers found significant variations in happiness according to the “extent of direct democracy” in each canton. The more influence each citizen had on his or her local governmental process, the higher the level of individual happiness.

This is something that should be studied further in the United States, including state-to-state comparisons.

In conclusion, the findings of happiness researchers can provide policy-makers with useful information about citizen concerns, formulating priorities, and assistance in devising programs to improve citizen happiness.

The Question of Growth

Everywhere you look, politicians, financial leaders, and even educators, talk about sustaining American growth. “The constant expansion of goods and services has become so basic to the American way of life that it is hard to even imagine what the consequences would be if Americans came to believe that it added little or nothing to their well-being.”

The numbers describing economic growth most often measure the health of our country: Gross Domestic Product, inflation numbers, per capita income, and trade balance measures.

Thus, one of the most “provocative” things happiness experts have done is raise the question of whether it is wise for Americans (and their government) to place so much emphasis on “increasing and sustaining economic growth.”

In the 1950s, people began to speak out about the booming American consumption and production cycle, expressing concern that continued growth would use up finite natural resources and damage our earth. These voices have grown even louder as the years have passed and scientific evidence mounts that humans are outstripping our planet.

Yet, “continuous expansion remains at the core of domestic policy.”

America has been caught up in the concept of expanding and growing without bounds for a century and even though some economists and most environmentalists believe that slowing growth would ultimately benefit the nation and the globe, it is an unlikely path.

For the time being, lawmakers could consider “making an effort at margin to strike a somewhat different balance between expansion and well-being.” With drastic American consumer spending growth, can’t legislators work on granting paid parental leave or enacting and enforcing environmental laws?

Even if these steps would cost in the short term, they would go a long way in bringing happiness to many Americans and fulfill our responsibility to coming generations.

What to Do About Inequality

The current gap between the wealthiest Americans and the poorest Americans has not been this wide since the 1920s. Because the poorest people tend to be the least happy “and since added income is thought to yield diminishing increments of happiness the further one moves up the economic ladder,” it makes one wonder whether taking some money from the rich to give to the poor doesn’t make sense. “The net effect would be to increase well-being.”

Interestingly, however, multiple studies of poor Americans show that these individuals do not believe that redistributive financial policies are a good idea. This is probably rooted in the uniquely American belief that people receive exactly what they earn or deserve. For instance, opinion surveys show that twice as many Americans as Europeans believe that the poor can become rich if only they work hard enough (60% compared to 29%).

Yet, there are many American families who do not have the money they need to buy necessities or pay for needed medical care. The best way to resolve this problem is not, however, to redistribute wealth from rich to poor in order to level incomes, but to provide services (such as an expanded food stamp program and universal health care) to help poor families.

Income equality is only one form of equality, and a pernicious and difficult to resolve problem. Another major problem is political equality.

Here's what we know:

- Political campaigns cost a great deal of money. Individuals and groups who donate large sums to political campaigns hold sway over the politicians who are elected with their help.
- The richest 3% of voters contribute 35% of all political donations.
- The poorest people are significantly less likely to vote, organize, or become members of a political group.

These differences “have a pronounced effect on the influence wielded by different income groups on policy.”

The most promising approach to rectifying the imbalance of influence in politics would be to “limit the influence of money and organization on elections by enacting measures to increase voting and change the ways campaigns are financed.” For example, supplying candidates with public funds for campaigning would diminish the hefty influence of direct-donors.

A problem would remain, however, with political actions committees, which are funded by anonymous donors and can run ads throughout campaigns. “Apparently such appeals command a greater importance in the eyes of the majority than the disproportionate political influence they give to well-organized segments of the population.”

Improving civic education among the poor could also help, as would making election days into federal holidays or holding elections on Sundays.

Equality of opportunity is also something that discourages happiness in many communities. Equality of opportunity does not give people things they do not deserve or jobs for which they are not qualified. Instead, ideally, equality of opportunity means that Americans need not be stuck in a life because of “arbitrary obstacles and exclusions.”

These arbitrary obstacles can be dismantled by the federal government through actions such as providing quality prenatal care to all expectant mothers (to improve rates of birth defects, prematurity, and physical handicaps), narrowing the gap between teacher pay at schools in poor communities and pay for teachers in affluent communities, and bringing the costs of college education down.

These actions, combined, would likely do more to balance income than would income redistribution. Such actions would also encounter fewer problems with public opinion.

Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz found that the growing gap between the rich and the poor since the 1970s is due to the shortage of children from lower-income families graduating from college and professional schools.

Ultimately, the claim that rates of happiness will rise with improved equality of opportunity is less powerful than this claim: that greater efforts to attain equality for all Americans are central to American principles of fairness and “are worth achieving quite apart from their effect on well-being.”

The Threat of Financial Hardship

The recent economic crisis made clear that everyone lives in risk of financial hardship. Employees just a few years from settling into the retirement they had saved for their entire lives now look at bank statements and investment portfolios and have to reassess their plans. Unemployment rates have shot up and families struck by illness struggle to pay rising medical bills.

Is there anything the government can do to ease the threat of financial hardship so many Americans face?

While social “legislation is a notoriously complicated subject” and is frequently met with opponents on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, here are some opportunities for reform:

- *Retirement*
 1. The government should look for ways to cap out-of-pocket health care costs for seniors, in addition to enacting a program to “defray the cost of long-term nursing home care.”
 2. We should increase the minimum Social Security benefit so that fewer seniors will live in poverty.

3. At the point of retirement, employees should be offered a clear explanation on the benefits of converting a 401(k) savings plan into an annuity.
 4. Congress should require all employers to offer 401(k) plans (though not force the employers to pay in); then, all workers would be required to save, unless they submit in writing that they prefer not to. That way, Congress could greatly increase the number of American workers saving for retirement while “still allowing individuals to refrain from participating.”
- *Health Care*
 1. Health insurance should offer all essential services (including long-term care), but omit elective cosmetic surgery and luxuries (such as private hospital rooms).
 2. All citizens and lawful resident aliens should be covered.
 3. “While co-payments and other measures may be needed to prevent overuse, out-of-pocket charges shouldn’t be set so high that they discourage access to needed services.”
 - *Losing a Job*
 1. Give American workers who have been fired a place for redress and appeal. While many people who are fired undoubtedly deserve to lose their jobs, some do not, and the U.S. is alone among developed countries in not providing a “simple form of redress.”
 2. For layoffs, the government could instate 60-day notice requirements for employers to inform employees who will be let go.
 3. “Decoupling” health insurance and jobs would make job loss somewhat less scary because, in addition to losing income, laid off workers also have to worry about paying for medication and doctors’ visits.
 4. More effective programs for helping Americans out of work could include tuition assistance for workers who want to attend community college for new training, or a “form of wage insurance that would pay employees up to half of any lost earnings if they were laid off but took a lower-paid, full-time job within six months of becoming unemployed.” Many workers who lose their jobs balk at taking a lower salary, but this would help.

Relieving Suffering

Chronic pain, which affects more than 50 million Americans, costs in both individual happiness and the American economy. Drug laws should be altered and enforced to encourage physicians to prescribe the proper types of medications that can improve people living in chronic pain. Government officials should do all they can to fix inconsistencies between state and federal regulations of the use of drugs for medical purposes. Minimizing under-treatment of chronic pain should be central to the government’s plan to improve America’s happiness.

Sleep disorders/deprivation is another major underreported problem that millions of Americans face. It, like depression and chronic pain, costs American employers in lost productivity. To help people who suffer from insomnia and other sleep disorders, the government should fund a major public health initiative to educate the public about sleep problems and the National Institutes of Health should fund major research into treating sleep problems.

Depression is a form of mental illness, and of every six Americans who have suffered from serious depression, only one has been treated correctly. Of the remaining five, two are treated incorrectly, and three are not treated at all. The government should help raise the fraction of seriously depressed people who get treatment through education and medical schools should be forced to provide better training to medical students in treating depression.

Marriage and Families

Policy makers already know that stable marriages provide a sturdy foundation for American children and American society. There are three different strategies the government can employ to strengthen marriage and families:

1. *Education*

This includes teen education (how and why to avoid pregnancy), teaching better communication skills to young couples before and during marriage, and teaching expectant and new parents parenting skills. Successful “interventions” can improve the well-being of Americans, especially young women. Even for older couples, marriage counseling is effective in reducing marital conflict and decreasing the rate of divorce. “Since marriage classes cost only a few hundred dollars (per) couple compared with an estimated cost to society of \$30,000 for each divorce,” these types of interventions make social as well as economic sense.

2. *Encourage marriage and responsible parenting*

The government should alter incentives to discourage births outside of wedlock and persuade low-income couples with children to marry.

3. *Encourage better care of children*

We know that the first six months of a baby’s life are vitally important in setting the groundwork for success and health. The U.S. needs to require employers to offer paid parental leave. In addition, greater efforts could be made to increase part-time jobs for mothers with small children, so they can spend more time with their children.

The Quality of Government

For most of the past 30 years, a majority of Americans have believed that the country is “moving in the wrong direction,” and they largely blame the government for the problems. A study done in 2007 found that only one-third of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time.

But how do these numbers compare to satisfaction and confidence rates in other leading democracies?

A World Bank review of the U.S. and six other world leaders found the U.S. below average on democratic performance. Among other aspects of national government, the study looked at effectiveness of government and quality of regulation. Our government’s performance is not as abysmal as American citizens believe, yet it’s far from perfect.

So what can be done?

One thing that can be nurtured is a more accurate and realistic perception of the government and what it’s able to do. The checks and balances of the U.S. federal government make for slow change, not sudden change. And the polarity between the extreme of the far Right and the far Left mean that finding middle ground takes a long time. Citizens need to recognize this.

Needless to say, true bipartisan efforts need to become the norm and not the exception. If the majority of Americans believe that the federal government is more likely to line its own pockets and protect reelection campaigns than help make things better, why should Americans support programs or pay higher taxes?

While the government cannot actually make people happier, policy makers can use what we know from happiness research in order to provide opportunities and offer incentives that can lead to happier lives for all Americans.

As more research emerges and policy makers both in the government and in nonprofits incorporate what we know about what makes people truly happy, we will find strong answers on how “to live wisely, agreeably, and well.”

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