

Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Caroline West – The pursuit of happiness

Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Caroline West's talk, the Pursuit of Happiness. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, that's my fan club. Thank you all so much for coming out on this miserably wet, raining day. I know some of you were here for the talk before on disaster, so I think it's very fitting that after disaster comes happiness.

So I'm a philosopher, as George said, by training and by profession, and there's a very long history of philosophers thinking about questions of happiness, what it is, how important is it, how do we get it, what are the sources of it. And it's a tradition that goes, in the western tradition at least, as far back as Aristotle, but of course this is a very rich tradition of eastern thought about happiness as well.

My personal interest in happiness. I'm glad I can tell this story. I feel like I can't tell in many contexts, but in a pub where everyone's had a few drinks, I can tell this story, and my partner is not here.

I personally got very interested in happiness when about 15 years ago when my partner and I were deciding to have kids, where or not to have kids, and I made the mistake of telling one of my somewhat strange but very well-meaning colleagues that we were sort of workshopping this issue. And so one day there was a knock on my door, and I opened the door, and my colleague was wielding this top psychology journal saying, you've got to read this, you've got to read this, page 12, you've got to have a look at the graph before you do anything. You've got to have a look at this graph.

Anyway, so I opened to page 11 duly as instructed, and the graph I must say made for seriously sobering reading. So it turns out, so this is very robust, well-replicated findings, that show that having kids just has a disastrous impact on happiness.

So, it happens that when you meet someone, you know, they're special. It all, your happiness curve, right, the chart this, the area under the curve, the higher the line the more happiness under the curve. Anyway, so you meet someone. They're fabulous. You're a couple, but things are going up. Maybe you get married or you cohabit or whatever, things are going up, everything's looking good. Looking good, looking good, looking good until the birth of the first child, and then it goes down, all the way down, and sorry, I've got to move back from that speaker. And then when you, it bottoms out in teenage years, about 16, and then if you're lucky and your kids leave home, and you live long enough to become a grandparent, then and only then does your happiness line begin to approach that of your childless by choice counterpart.

Okay, so I looked at this. I took it home to my partner. I said, let's stare this data in the face, and I'll tell you how it ended later on.

So that's how I first got interested in happiness, because I read the study. I thought long and hard about it. I saw how well replicated it was. But I started thinking about, you know, what is this study really measuring in the name of happiness.

Is it happiness, is it really happiness or happiness of a kind that really matters? How important is happiness anyway in the grand scheme of things? Would I be making a rational mistake if I went ahead and had kids? Is this what the data, is this what I should infer from the data that it's somehow kind of irrational to go ahead and have kids given that it's got this kind of terrible effect on happiness?

So that's what got me started thinking about happiness. So today I want to talk a little bit about where I've got to from that sort of starting point.

So when philosophers think about happiness, they really are interested in three questions, three big questions if you like about happiness. What is it? How important is it? Is it the summum bonum? Is it one of a number of important goods? Is it not very important at all? And what are the sources of it?

And over the last 50 years or so, psychologists have started doing a lot of research into sort empirically based research, trying to look at the sources of happiness, you know, what sorts of activities and circumstances give rise to happiness, make people happier, and what sorts of activities and circumstances make people less happy. And this advice is, as we speak, being used in a very practical way by individuals but also by governments, who are making policies, and they like their policies to be informed by, among other things, whether or not they're going to, they're likely to increase happiness.

So, I want to sort of cast some critical thoughts about what's being measured, and I'd be interested to see what you think about that. So just to start, let's start with a question, what is happiness. So I'm going to say a little bit about each of the big three questions of happiness.

I'm going to start by thinking about what is happiness and outlining for you too quite different ways of thinking about what happiness is. Then I'm going to talk about what the studies are telling us about the causes and correlates of happiness. And then I'm going to raise questions at the end about how much we should care about the thing that the studies are measuring.

Maybe we should care a lot, maybe not so much. I'm going to see what you think about that.

So starting with what is happiness, there's a way of thinking about happiness now, which is very influential, where you just treat happiness as particular sort of psychological state.

So when you say that someone is happy, what you're saying is that they're in a certain state of mind or they're in a certain sort of combination of psychological states.

And that way of thinking about happiness became very popular around the enlightenment. [Inaudible] other people who started thinking about happiness wanted to identify happiness with pleasure, sort of broadly understood.

And it's roughly that way of thinking about happiness, that very psychologistic way of thinking about happiness that has been taken up by psychologists who are interested in measuring happiness. They try and do it, they do it in various ways, but one way, you know what they're measuring is sort feelings, how people feel. Well people's reported satisfaction levels with their life as a whole.

So psychologists often don't talk about happiness [inaudible]. They're talk about subjective well-being, much more precise. And subjective well-being has like three components.

So I'm partly telling you this so you know what the studies are measuring when we talk about, when we come later to talk about what the causes and correlates of happiness are, you know, what kind of happiness we're talking about.

So there are three components to subjective Well-Being. One component is positive affect or positive emotion. So things like joy, excitement, engagement, interest.

Another component is negative affect or rather the absence of it. So negative, so-called negative emotions like anger, jealousy, boredom, sadness.

I think as a philosopher I think one very interesting question, which sadly we can't really pursue here given time limits is whether these so-called negative emotions really are negative. I mean I think there's probably lots of cases where grief and sadness and so on are all things considered actually not negative at all but desirable. But we'll just flag it and set it to one side.

So there's positive emotion, the relative absence of negative emotions, and then something that's called life satisfaction, which has to do with people's reported levels of satisfaction with your life.

So it's roughly to what extent does the life that you actually have, as you yourself subjectively think about it, measure up to your life ideal, that the life you hope or expected yourself to have. And the closer the match between your actual life and your ideal life, the happier you are, and the greater the gap, the less happy you are.

One thing that is worth stressing is that those three components, so if you put them all together, a sort of happy person is someone who is frequently joyful and cheerful, only occasionally sad, and generally pretty satisfied with his or her life.

So one thing though that is also worth noting about subjective well-being is that those three components or sort of the first two and the third, are not just conceptually different things. They're empirically quite different things.

So, it's possible to be very satisfied with your life when you assess it intellectually, even while you're experiencing quite a lot of negative emotion.

And actually, I think when you think about it, you can think of examples of people like that, you know, they sort of think about their life as a whole, and they sort of think, oh, yeah, I can tick all the boxes, you know, all the middle class boxes. You know, I've got, you know, a decent income, decent job. I've got a family. I've got a house, if you were looking to buy [inaudible] whenever. And, you know, I've got kids, and they're doing well. They're at good schools. You know, yeah, life's pretty great.

You can think all of those things intellectually while being empty, blue, sad, and so on, and some people think this is like an interesting fact about the modern condition. That, you know, people feel like they can sort of tick all these boxes intellectually but still sort of don't feel, if you like, emotionally engaged and satisfied with their lives. They sort of judge their life to be satisfactory, but they don't love their life or like their life or derive lots of enjoyment from it.

So, that's the kind of psychological way of thinking about happiness. That the studies, the psychology studies that I'm going to talk about are measuring, but there's another kind of quite different really way of thinking about happiness, which is being very influential in kind of Western philosophical, and some Eastern actually, philosophical traditions of thinking about happiness. Where happiness is not necessarily a psychological state at all, what it is to be happy is to be leading a good life, you know, a life that's good for the person who is living it.

So happiness in that sense is a sort of a valuative idea. Sometimes people call this kind eudaimonic happiness. So when you say that, to say that someone's happy is to say that they're sort of fairing well, or their life is going well for them.

And that usage of happiness actually picks up on the original etymology of the English word happiness, which first appears around 1380 in writing anyway in Chaucer's House of Fame. And there happiness doesn't refer at all to a feeling. It's rather, it means, you know, from a good hat, being fortunate or lucky.

And so the happiness of the person who wins the lottery say consists in their good luck, the fact that they won the lottery and not in their feelings of joy or whatever that they might experience as a result, which are rather sort of consequences of happiness.

So, and that's the sense of happiness which you find in all those biblical sayings. Happy is the man doesn't mean cheerful is the person who gets wise or whatever, it means fortunate or lucky, you know, that person is fairing well.

So that kind of eudaimonic way of thinking about happiness is quite different from the psychological way of thinking about it, and actually potentially sort of intention with it, think you can--so just because you can imagine cases and maybe there are, we'll see, maybe there are real-life cases where people are in all the right sorts of psychological states to count as happy on the psychological definition, but they're not fairing well. Maybe they're enjoying their life, they're subjectively satisfied with it or whatever, but only because they're radically deluded about the actual circumstances of their life. You know, so there's some evidence that optimists [inaudible] like this, sort of cheerful but deluded, pessimists less happy but more realistic.

So we can ask, you know, is it better to be a cheerful optimist or, and we can talk about why optimists are like that and pessimists are like that, but we need more than 30 minutes.

So, yeah, so those are really two very different ways of thinking about happiness, and I mention that sort of partly to sort of put the psychological way of thinking in context and compare it to other ways that you might think about happiness.

So, now I'm just going to shelve for now the eudaimonic conception and just talk a little bit about what the studies say about what makes you happy in this kind of psychological sense of happiness.

Actually, before I do that, I should just say that one of my favourite philosophers, like as a philosophy you always get asked who your favourite philosophers are, and I feel like I should have a famous one, like everyone knows who they are, but actually my favourite philosopher is John Stuart Mill. He's a British philosopher. He's wonderful, but no one, does anyone know who John Stuart Mill is?

Oh, yes. Oh, fantastic. That makes me so happy!

So John Stuart Mill noticed a very long time ago, he actually was, took very seriously the psychological way of thinking about happiness but pointed out that if what you wanted were these kind of good feelings, then it was a mistakes to actively live your life consciously going around trying to get them.

So he called this the paradox of hedonism. I mean it's not like a logical paradox, but it's sort of a practical paradox. And if I can get some light--so he said, so he wanted to say, if you really want the psychological happiness in, you know, and you want these good feelings, then the best way to get them is not by consciously aiming at getting the good feelings but rather

by finding worthwhile activities that you care about and pursue for their own sake, and then you'll get the good feelings as a sort of byproduct.

And that prediction, which Mill made more or less from, you know, from his philosopher's armchair, has been really born out by a lot of research about happiness, and maybe one reason why some people think that the fixation on feeling good that the happiness industry produces is actually sort of a bit counterproductive, because it makes people think too much about, am I feeling good yet? Am I feeling good yet? Am I feeling good yet. And that, of course, itself undermines feeling good.

So I won't read you Mill's quote because it's too dark, but he says, those only are happy who aim at things other than their own happiness. You know, pursuing other things along the way, or this isn't exactly accurate, but something like this, they find, you know, they find happiness by the way, ask yourself if you're happy and you cease to be so. It's a lovely quote from his autobiography where he describes, you know, what it's like to have a nervous breakdown and various other things, and it's a fantastic read.

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So, what brings psychological happiness, what do the studies say? Well, first look at what they say doesn't bring happiness. You know, so some things that you think might bring happiness in the psychological way that don't actually bring happiness.

So youth, some people have thought, brings happiness. Not so. The shape of happiness levels with age is kind of the shape of a smile. You kind of, you start off happy, you get less happy. This is good news for middle-aged people like me. They say, it's only up from here, and providing you stay healthy, providing you stay healthy, and then it's good, and there's lots of, you know, we could spend a year talking about why it might be that you get happier as you get older.

Not beauty, not intelligence. Smarter people are no happier than less smart people as measured on IQ tests.

Levels of education is not strongly correlated at all with happiness. Money is a very interesting example. So, some kinds of happiness are correlated weekly with earning more money. By weekly I mean nowhere near as strongly correlated as having good friends and stuff. But there is some correlation with life satisfaction in materialistic societies like this.

So as people, so when you look at how happiness levels go up with income, what you find is if you're looking at how successful people judge their lives to be, how satisfied they are with their lives, they'll say that they're more satisfied as their income goes up. It's not quietly near, it's sort of logarithmic, but still, it goes up.

But interestingly, if you're looking at how people feel moment to moment as they go about their lives, over a certain threshold, relatively low, 75,000 U.S. or equivalent million, every extra dollar you earn makes no difference to how you feel moment to moment as you go about your life. Until you get to like 125 million or you're on the Forbes rich list and then you're like massively cheerier than everyone else.

So, but I find that a very important and very striking finding, that it doesn't matter whether you earn 75,000 or 120,000 or 750,000 or 10 million dollars annual income a year, it makes next to no difference to how you feel moment to moment as you go about your life.

So if on reflection what you care about is this kind of emotional wellbeing, then this is kind of a reason not to care too much about money. And there's a very worrying trend that people

are caring more and more about money and less and less about love, but happiness goes up as attachment to money decreases and attachment to love increases.

So, we could talk a lot about the potential courses of, you know, growing unhappiness. You probably know that the World Health Organisation estimates that by 2020 the leading health problem in the world will be depression. So, yeah, so perhaps where valuing the wrong sorts of things, insofar as we care about emotional well-being.

One thing about money studies is that it would be interesting to see whether life satisfaction goes up with money in societies that don't value money very much, because if you think why life satisfaction might go up, money is a, you're sort of thinking, am I successful in life, and money is a very obvious objective way that you can sort of measure am I successful in life in a society that cares about that.

So I haven't seen [inaudible] life satisfaction and money from less materialistic societies, but I'd be interested to see whether there's still that correlation there.

Okay, so what does make us happy then? Well, genes make us happy. Count for between 40 and 60 percent of happiness levels, in variations in happiness levels in a population between 40 and 60 percent of the variation can be explained by genetic factors.

But it's a bit like, so this is known among psychologists as sort of set point theory. So the idea is that each of us has a kind of, each of us has, [inaudible] each of us has a sort of a default happiness point or range that we're disposed to return to after good things happen to us and bad things happen to us. You know, the good things happen.

Our happiness goes up for a while and then tends to adapt quite quickly, even to winning a lottery, you know, six months on, and eventually people are ecstatic and overjoyed, and six months on, not much difference at all.

Becoming a paraplegic in an accident, you would think would have a very long-term adverse impact on people's happiness levels, but not so, sort of six months later on there's not much difference. Even at the same time though that paraplegics would be quite, would be prepared many of them to pay quite a bit of money to walk again. So it's an interesting, they don't report lower happiness, but they would like to, they would be prepared to pay money to be able to walk again.

So what that means, I suppose we can take some solace from that, it means that bad things are never as bad as you think they're going to be, and I guess the less good thing side of that is that good things are never as good as you think they're going to be. They're good for a little while, and then you adapt.

So think of a set point theory as a bit like, you know, your resting heart rate or something like that. So there are things that you can do, you know, so everyone has a sort of default resting heart rate. No matter how hard I try, I'm never going to have the resting heart rate of Michael [inaudible] or some insane athlete like that.

But there are things I can do, diet and exercise training, that sort of stuff, to get my resting heart rate lower than it currently is, you know, within the range that's sort of possible for me, there's a sort of genetic range. And so psychologists think something like that is true with happiness as well. Each of us has some sort of set point range.

And so you know those cheerful people who just experience positive emotions very readily? They've got a sort of set point range that's quite high, and then there are other people who don't experience positive emotions so readily, and their kind of set point level is lower.

So, you can, you might not be able to, if you're a grumpy person, you might not be able to transform yourself into some chipper, upbeat, exuberant, optimistic, life-embracing person, but you can raise where you are in your set point by doing various things.

So what things could you do? Well, you could spend time with your friends. Friends are better than family, if you can choose. Especially a variety of friends, there is actually a paper in a journal, if you're interested, I can email you a copy, that talks about the optimum rate for rotating your friends so as to maximise utility in every moment. So because of course you adapt to friends, so I'm happy to share that with you. I think the rate is see a friend, there's a variable for closeness of friendship, but roughly like once every 2.8 weeks for each friend, and you can do that, and don't tell your friends.

So a good relationship, married people are happier than cohabiting people. Rewarding work but not overwork. Leisure activities and projects, even better when they're social. Join a team sport. Decent amounts of sleep and exercise. Well you knew that already.

Active religiosity is very interesting. Being actively religious, that means praying, attending church and so on, the studies are mostly in the U.S., and they're mostly on traditional religions like Catholicism and Evangelical religions and so on, not religions like Buddhism and so on. But the active religiosity, attending church more than once a week is incredibly strongly correlated with happiness.

The [inaudible] is mostly in the U.S., and so there might be sort of specific U.S. centred reasons why, you know, for instance in the U.S. if you don't believe in God, you're just like an evil, evil person, and you know – yeah, never, never.

So there's that sort of pressure, right, that there's this idea that atheists are bad, right, and that sort of has all sorts of, you know, negative social effects on people who proclaim themselves to be atheists.

So meditation, more than 10,000 hours of transcendental meditation has a significant boost on happiness.

Gratitude and performing acts of selfless kindness. So actually a cheaper way of getting the equivalent happiness boost to a \$30,000 pay increase is to write a letter thanking a teacher at school for the, or whoever, you know, someone from your life who made this very significant contribution for which you're very thankful, write them a letter. It doesn't matter whether or not you actually send it, though you should intend to send it. [laughter] And that will bring a lasting boost, shortly, a temporary six weeks, but still lasting, people significantly better as if they got a significant pay raise.

Okay. So let me tell you just quickly, I know time is running short, but let me tell you just a few other things that the studies also say. I should just actually sound a couple of notes of caution, so one is that a lot of the studies are giving you correlations, not causes, so we don't know whether happiness is a cause of success in love or life or a sort of result of it, probably a bit of both.

There are some studies which try and look for causes, but I must say some of them are a bit mythologically dodgy, like looking at smiles in people's yearbooks and deciding where. So, I should just say, if all the studies were as methodologically dodgy as that, I would not be talking to you about the findings tonight.

I mean some of them are methodologically very good, especially the ones by Daniel Kahneman [phonetic], some of you probably know he's a Nobel Prize winner. He has dedicated his life now to trying to understand the, you know, the causes of, you know, what makes people feel good about their lives as moment to moment they go about their lives.

Okay. So studies also show conservative [inaudible] are much happier. Racially homogenous societies are much happier than racially diverse ones.

I told you about the data how married couples without children are just astronomically happier than those with, and now I confess I have two kids, and they lovely. But my colleague who gave me the study, he's got two dogs, and I must say, he seems pretty chipper, and not at all tired, not at all tired.

In fact, when you put all the data from the studies together, what you find is that the happiest people in the world are conservative, middle-aged, narcissistic, church-going men living in Northern Europe [laughter], and so I think, I think that this raises a question about what we should make of all this data, you know, how much should you really care about the kind of happiness that's being measured.

Is what's being measured happiness? Is it happiness of a kind that you really care about?

And the idea that there might be more to life than this kind of psychologistic happiness has a very long history, not in just in philosophy but also in many, many, in literature and plenty of novels, films. And one of the most famous of them, and I'll close with this quote, is Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. And you might remember there's a debate in that between the savage, John, who thinks that Brave New World is this kind of horrific dystopia in which people are kind of cheerful but deluded and deprived of all sorts of important human goods, and the control [inaudible] who thinks like this is like, this is an ideal life because people, I mean people in Brave New World, they're as high as you could be in subjective well-being. What else could you want?

And so here is [inaudible] saying to the savage, the world is stable now. People are happy. They get what they want, and they never want what they can't get.

They are well off, I'm sorry, I'm finding a light here, they are well off. They are safe. They are never ill. They are not afraid of death. They are blissfully ignorant of pains and old age. They have no mothers and fathers to worry about and so forth. They're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as there, and if anything goes wrong, there's [inaudible] which you go and check out in the name of liberty, Mr. Savage, liberty.

And the Savage says, but I don't want comfort. I want poetry. I want real danger. I want freedom. I want goodness. I want sin.

And [inaudible] says, in fact, you're claiming the right to be unhappy, not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent, the right, I don't see why that follows, but anyway [laughter], the right to have syphilis and cancer, I don't see why that follows either, the right to have too little to eat, the right to be lousy, the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow, the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.

The savage, who does have to think about it a little bit says, I claim them all. And the [inaudible] shrugs his shoulders and says, you're welcome.

[Applause]

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