

I'm Dr Will Davies, Director of the Political Economy Research Centre at Goldsmiths. I research how 'happiness' has become an obsession for governments and businesses, helping to shape public policy, marketing and management. AMA!

DrWillDavies¹and/ScienceAMAs¹

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Abstract

Hi Reddit, My background is in sociology, but I have always wanted to understand how other disciplines view the world and shape our thinking. My first book, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, traced how the ideas of Chicago School economists transformed how markets are regulated by law, and how ideas of Harvard Business School strategists transformed how we understand political leadership. My recent book, *The Happiness Industry*, outlines a critical history of attempts to measure and optimise our subjective feelings (emotions), from Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century through to the latest practices in 'neuro-marketing' and twitter 'sentiment analysis'. I've written for various publications, including *The Atlantic*, *Salon.com*, *The Financial Times* and *The New York Times*. Before becoming an academic, I worked in policy think tanks, where I first became interested in how experts are influenced by the social sciences. I am currently director of the Political Economy Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London. This AMA has now ended. Thanks very much for all of your excellent questions, and your interest in my work. Stay happy(ish)!

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Science AMA Series: I'm Dr Will Davies, Director of the Political Economy Research Centre at Goldsmiths. I research how 'happiness' has become an obsession for governments and businesses, helping to sh

DR_WILL_DAVIES [R/SCIENCE](#)

ABSTRACT

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If happiness is now an obsession for government and businesses, what are negative effects of that or what consequences may arise as a result?

[pauseforasecond](#)

I have at least two concerns here. One of the risks is that managers and policy-makers become more concerned with symptoms than causes. Hence, instead of viewing stress amongst school children (which is rising fast at present in my country) as a basis on which to question the nature of our education system, it is viewed as something which needs fixing with mindfulness training or happiness lessons. The symptom – stress – becomes the focus, and the context becomes ignored. Secondly, there is the risk that we view more and more of our personal, ethical, cultural and political questions as matters that can be answered by experts or by data. Things like wearable tech contribute to this further. We are heading towards a society in which anything – a concert, a relationship, a walk in the forest – can be evaluated scientifically, in terms of how it makes us feel. Ambiguity and nuance are lost along the way, as we get seduced by the notion that 'science' can tell us how to live our lives.

I read somewhere that having lower expectations results in a happier life. Do you think that this is true? Could this be the reason that some people in less developed nations report being happier than people in nations like the United States? Do you think people are less happy than they were in the past? Also,

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how does social media effect the happiness of people? Does it cause less happiness due to comparing oneself to others?

[SorceressFane](#)

I wouldn't want to defend having lower expectations. However, I do think that we suffer from a problem in wealthier countries, of expecting our pleasures/happiness to carry on growing, in proportion to our wealth. Capitalism is a system premised on the idea of infinite growth - there is no maximum amount of money that someone can have, or maximum amount of profit that can be made, or GDP that can be generated. But human beings are finite creatures, with finite physical needs, and a finite number of years of life. People who are constantly straining against the limits of their own physical bodies or their own mortality will probably be miserable. This was well understood by figures such as Durkheim and Freud.

Is happiness the goal of most cultures? Have you studied any societies where individual happiness was not important?

Also, to what extent is an individual's happiness determined by their exposure to negative experiences?

[joeltrane](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness. So I've not studied any particular national contexts as such.

What do you think of Gross National Happiness? Is Bhutan really the happiest place in the world? (I'm actually living there right now)

[rubberwings](#)

I've never looked closely at GNH or Bhutan. I'm curious to know how the index actually influences decision-making. I can imagine such an index could have plenty of positive consequences, if it involved (say) distributing employment differently, or reducing inequality. But I'd be less comfortable if it involved more happiness training and behaviour change policies. The reason the latter worries me is that it leads us to view the sources of our unhappiness (or happiness) as internal to the individual, which can itself lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy amongst people who fail to be happy (just as in more market-based societies, being unemployed can become a source of shame). Happiness indexes may have a lot to contribute, but only if they are used as a basis for reforming society, not if they become ways for disciplining individuals.

What does it even mean to discuss happiness in a quantitatively significant way? As in, what is the process of analysis? Sure we can survey in certain patterns, but do people know if they're happy or not? It seems difficult to consider an objective model of happiness proliferation or cultivation or what have you based on accounts made by individuals who, at least as far as I can tell, are extremely fickle in their estimation of their own psychological/emotional status. Thanks.

[The Symbiotic Boy](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness. So if anything, I'm quite sceptical towards the measures that are out there, though some are undoubtedly better than others.

How much do cultural differences factor into quantifying happiness? If its self-reported then how do you normalize over cultures where its more important to keep a brave face?

Surely collectivist vs individualist societies have very different notions of happiness and transfer an individual from one to the other would mean they'd have a high chance of being very unhappy despite being exposed to the same external conditions as everyone else?

[sriage](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness. So if anything, I'm quite sceptical towards the measures that are out there, though some are undoubtedly better than others.

Do you think "happiness" is a worthy goal for governing bodies? Most all dystopian novels feature governments that are obsessed with spreading a utilitarian "happiness" (unfortunately for the heroes, most peoples' views of happiness value security and stability over innovation and freedom). If happiness isn't what we should aim for, what is?

[turkeyprovolone](#)

I share your disquiet about utilitarianism as a basis for government. I think politics needs ways of factoring in human suffering into decision-making, which may involve survey techniques and the like. I don't have a problem with that. But the notion that any public institution, policy or business decision can be assessed in terms of its effect on happiness (which was Jeremy Bentham's somewhat utopian ideal) is potentially dangerous. I think we need to do without ultimate aims, and focus instead on articulating plural aims to one another, listening to them, and living alongside the ones with which we disagree. That's the challenge of democracy.

In what ways does your research show the difference between preferences (modern utility) and happiness?

[urnbabyurn](#)

I'm interested in the historical development of that notion of utility. For me as a sociologist, one interesting aspect of it is that the notion of 'preferences' really only emerged at the same time as the phenomenon of shopping, circa 1860-1880. The notion that an individual might go through life, selecting things with a view to maximising their own pleasure, is actually a very peculiar philosophy, that makes little sense outside of consumer culture (with department stores, advertising etc). Hence, to the extent that we have allowed our idea of happiness to collapse into that of utility, in the neo-classical economists' sense of the term, we are failing to fully question or recognise the economic system that gives rise to it. I think there are better philosophies of happiness, many of which have informed the science of happiness. But economists struggle to fully distance themselves from some Benthamite idea of hedonic calculus.

I was raised to value financial success and education over happiness, though I strive for happiness as well. Though I don't have a standard measure for success, I admire the progress Finland has made in education since the Millennium. Can you tell me about their happiness as a nation? Is there a nation that sets a happiness example that you think the world could learn from? Is there a relationship between financial success and happiness? Thanks.

[kissbang23](#)

I'm afraid I don't know much about Finland. Scandinavian countries are often held up as the example to emulate: they have good family-friendly policies, good work-life balance, relatively low levels of economic inequality, decent welfare provision. These are all important factors in happiness. However, some would argue that these societies are also quite culturally and ethnically homogeneous, which is not necessarily something that one would want to pursue elsewhere. So I think there are always problems in trying to mimick certain national models.

Is happiness really the right thing to optimize for?

Some things, particularly new information, can be objectively desirable but reduce your happiness. (For example, learning about someone's death.)

Ignorance is bliss?

[LaurieCheers](#)

Yes, this is certainly a fundamental philosophical problem. I'm quite interested in Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia, which would suggest that a failure to confront the real sources of unhappiness may actually be a form of depression (paradoxically). Only by opening oneself up to loss and sadness is it possible to then experience future happiness.

First of all Thank you for doing this AMA! I am very interested in this topic and I really look forward to reading your stuff.

My question might be a bit uninformed, but do you think that happiness is just an emotion, or is it more along the lines of Aristotle's happiness?

[throwitawaynow10101](#)

My own view of happiness would be closer to Aristotle's, that it is something that involves social activity and human flourishing. There are philosophers and economists – Amartya Sen, most famously – who have taken Aristotle's philosophy of happiness, and tried to convert it into a science of wellbeing, with metrics that can be applied. I have huge admiration for Sen's work. But I think a lot of happiness science today, especially at the more commercial end of this, has a far more reduced and reductive idea of happiness, as a bodily, behavioural and neuroscientific phenomenon, that fluctuates a bit like blood pressure. That's what my book is primarily a critique of.

Why do you think honor, loyalty, dignity, became replaced by happiness in terms of life goals? At one point in history, people prided themselves on their personal dignity and today it seems people are willing to give that up as long as they are happy. If it makes you happy then: live in a box, shave half your head, ignore your family, etc.

[SANPres09](#)

I'm not sure I entirely share the premise of your question, but you're clearly touching on something significant. In many ways, the rise of happiness as a concern for policy-makers, businesses and individuals themselves is a consequence of the fragmentation of traditions and moral conventions. Much of this can be dated back to the late 1950s, a time when traditions and moral conventions started to feel suffocating and dull. Humanist psychology emerged at this time, specifically to privilege human flourishing over conformity, and set the stage for the 1960s culture of consumerism and sexual

emancipation. It was also the late 1950s when anti-depressants were first discovered. The question we need to ask is how did the emancipatory spirit of that historical moment gradually collapse into the predictable, scientific, commercialised pursuit of happiness we're offered today. I think the answer lies a lot in the changing shape of capitalism, and the need to channel human desires into the market.

Why does the "system" not believe that introverts exist? It seems like anyone who simply prefers peace and quiet must be converted into another consumer. I have a strong inclination to believe that this happiness obsession is truly an attempt to get more out of the workforce, and quell public dissent. Doing this in such a contrived fashion is only going to piss more people off.

[barrano247](#)

Yes, there are various norms of behaviour and emotion built into these types of knowledge. Another one would be the need to be constantly moving around. The whole wearable technology industry is predicated on the notion that we are always in motion, either at work or jogging. But what about sitting still to read a book? Or just staring out the window? What does an apple watch have to say about that?

Greetings Mr. Davies,

First off I would like to say we have the same last name so maybe I'll see you at a family reunion!

My question is: If the government and businesses are happy, does that happiness trickle down to citizens and consumers?

[nietsniEtrebIA](#)

No, probably not. I assume your reference to 'trickle down' is an allusion to 'trickle down economics'. We now know that trickle down economics doesn't work, and inequality continues to rise today. One problem with it is that all parties suffer: the rich and powerful become increasingly paranoid, as they become separated from the rest of society. So there is good reason to suspect that nobody is very happy, in a society where elites are cut off from everyone else. See you at that reunion!

Thanks for doing this ama!

Do you think most people in the world ultimately try to achieve the same goal, whether that be happiness, some other subjective state, or something else?

If not, how, if at all, do you think people can resolve conflicts of interest?

[ScarletEgret](#)

No, clearly people don't all try to achieve the same goal. I think that there is a utopian, Enlightenment ideal underlying the happiness industry, which is that it's possible to solve core ethical and political dilemmas using data. This is basically what Jeremy Bentham believed, and it is now what much of Silicon Valley is selling us, by way of wellbeing apps and so on. But people can and do resolve conflicts of interest without common metrics of value: that is what politics is fundamentally about, and we should not give up on it.

How much does your work relate to that of Nicolas Christakis? As I understand it he found that a lot of subjective feelings are "contagious" through social networks. Do you view governments and businesses as some of these networks?

[strasbourne](#)

My book on happiness is a critical and historical reflection on how we came to invest so much scientific and political hope in the idea of 'happiness', as a quasi-objective, quantifiable thing. In the course of this, I tell various stories about key individuals who have shaped the way we think about happiness – one of which happens to be Christakis. I think his work on social networks is very interesting, but also quite ethically and politically problematic. What are the implications of the claim that emotions are 'contagious'? I quote one psychologist in my book who suggests that people should be careful about hanging out with people with a negative attitude, in case they should 'catch' this contagion. The risk is that this type of knowledge produces vicious and virtuous circles, in which happy, sociable people accrue more and more advantages, and unhappy, lonely people become shunned. Of course I don't hold Christakis responsible for that. But it needs to be remembered that the methods of social science have cultural and political consequences. Treating mood as a 'social contagion' is likely to alter the way people behave as a result.

Hi Dr. Davies, thanks for doing this AMA. My question about the "happiness" metric is pretty much just, do you think it's working the way it should or is there room for improvement? Thanks!

[softmatter](#)

which metric are you talking about?

Is there a better goal than happiness for governments and societies to strive for?

[annoyingstranger](#)

I think we may need to cope without any single metric of success. Metrics have their place, but the notion that there can be an ultimate goal for governments and societies, and that it can be used as a basis for empirical evaluation (i.e. as a measure) is utopian. I read this morning that a glacier in Greenland is currently breaking up, which could raise sea-levels by over half a metre. Preventing that seems like quite enough of a goal for governments and societies, without worrying about how it might make us feel as a consequence.

how do you manage your happiness?

[neouto](#)

Cold beer.

I haven't finished reading your book because I'm a worker in a happiness industry myself which makes it a bitter pill to swallow, so you'll have to excuse me if you've already answered this question but here goes:

To what extent, if any, do you see the quantification and commodification of happiness as being counterproductive to the actual experience of happiness itself?

[Buffalo_Buffalo](#)

I think that the commercial uses (as opposed to, say, the medical uses) of happiness science are often quite damaging to the experience of happiness. Advertisers and managers have seized the idea of

happiness in a big way over recent years, and social media platforms have reduced positive emotions to relatively empty icons and buttons to click. The problem is that this creates a type of inflation, where our language loses the capacity to communicate emotions, and we have to resort to ever more impassioned, even hysterical expressions of joy, in order to share positive feelings. Advertising has always been guilty of this to some extent, but social media means it is now more entangled with our social and personal lives. Our constant need to display our happiness, to share it, to visualise it, is a problem. This is why many studies of facebook have shown that it is ultimately bad for happiness: it produces an arms race, where everyone is jealously gazing at others, and trying to put on displays of bliss in return.

What is the unit of measurement for happiness?

[knotafan](#)

There are plenty of methodologies. One key distinction for happiness scientists is between 'reported' happiness and 'experienced' happiness. 'Reported' happiness is measured using survey questions such as "generally speaking, how happy are you with your life?", and involves a subjective reflection on one's state of being. 'Experienced' happiness is a moment-to-moment phenomenon, which requires techniques such as the 'Day Reconstruction Method', in which individuals try and state how happy they were in the moment of doing different activities throughout the day, or using smart phone apps which prod the user for their happiness in the present moment. All of these are quantitative scales. Researchers differ over the best type of scale – a 1-10 scale will yield different types of results from a -5 to +5 scale for example. These are ultimately ethical issues. There can never be a perfect way of measuring happiness, or an ultimate unit.

After reading gilles deleuze's PostScript :societies of control, i am not really surprised. But nice this makes it to reddit :) edit : i found an awesome Interpretation on it <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=720Kx3NdDig>

[nug4t](#)

it's a fascinating essay, which does indeed anticipate some of what I'm writing about

i think the obsession with happiness is actually destroying what it means to be happy, by this I mean - without the opposite unhappiness, you can never appreciate happiness, and eventually happiness becomes mundane and not happy, your thoughts?

[3_eyes](#)

Yes, and the science of emotion renders it even more mundane. For example, it is one thing to experience joy in the context of beautiful countryside. It is quite another to visit a particular location, because one believes it is scientifically proven to have a positive effect on one's brain chemistry. But the latter approach seems to be where we're heading, and it strips the meaning out of things.

Have you ever read "Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley?

[Akesgeroth](#)

Yes. It is a wonderfully insightful book.

What is your take on the yoga industry? How are these industries affecting policy in government regarding happiness (if at all)? Lastly, what cautionary advice would you give people who take part in this industry?

[zarsism](#)

I don't know much about the yoga industry. The influence on policy depends on the country, obviously. In Britain, where I live, there has been quite a lot of influence, though a lot of it has been in the realm of active labour market policies, i.e. trying to get people back into work, by making them more positive and energetic. This has been widely criticised, because it has sometimes involved manipulative and even bullying uses of positive psychology (making people recite chants, about how positive they are etc). Overall, I have no problem with individuals engaging with self-help or any other techniques to help improve their happiness, especially if they are suffering from mood disorders, for which they of course deserve sympathy. But I think the cautionary advice would be that emotions are not like physical symptoms: they are complex, context-related and interpersonal. The idea that we can manage our emotions, just as we can manage our weight, is deeply flawed. It makes unhappy people feel worse about themselves, and entirely misses the social dimension of our psychological and emotional lives. I'm sure there is a lot we can all learn about how to live better lives, but this type of learning is closer to that of wisdom, that we gather from experience and from each other, and not a matter of collecting scientific data.

It seems likely that any measure or metric to define emotions or well being could very well turn into an industry. Does such a metric exist? Is it just a matter of accuracy and misleading results or is the attempted manipulation itself the problem?

Also as a bonus question:

I'm a political science graduate and have been working for the past two years in data analysis, collection, and research but would like to make the move to policy study. How did you break into policy research and analysis?

[nottestedonanimals](#)

You're absolutely right. This is the key thing: once you start to put numbers on things (no matter how good your intentions are), you open the door to their commercialisation. And such metrics do exist (there are too many examples to list, but look for example at Gallup's wellbeing or Employee Engagement surveys and metrics). It's difficult to be against measurement of people per se, because that's how the social sciences work. But I think we need to be wary of how measures become tools for manipulation and surreptitious behaviour change. In my critique, I'm not challenging the accuracy of the studies (though some are certainly more credible than others) but the way in which these quantitative indexes are infiltrating our culture, our selves and our relationships. Even a very good science of happiness brings problems with it, in fact it might possibly bring more problems, if everyone came to view it as the ultimate index of ethical action.

Edit: I saw you touch on this subject in another answer after I posted, but I'd like to hear more, specifically to my criticism of current methods.

I've read that people diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (or those who are chronically miserable) have a corollary tendency to have a more accurate world-view. In one of your answers to a previous question, you mention that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and positive psychology could reduce the need for antidepressants. I generally believe that voluntarily serving others and

unnecessary aesthetic improvement is a way to "save society, save yourself." I would love to see our government, community leaders, and psychologists share this belief with me, naturally, but also a man in your position. I'm not sure policies, marketing, and management are appropriate avenues for the task of "happiness," as they are all forms of homogenization and manipulation. Emotional supply-side economics, if you will.

My question is, couldn't both CBT and psychopharmaceuticals, under the premise that depression is a symptom of being "realistic," be considered a form of brain-washing oneself to tolerate the intolerable, and that the growing popularity of these treatments could mean we're focusing on individual happiness too much, and not on the flaws within society that cause unhappiness in the first place?

[Cellarhuk](#)

I wasn't meaning to advocate more CBT. My critique of the happiness industry generally is that it seeks to manipulate emotions and subjective responses, at the expense of any broader agenda for social or economic transformation. And CBT would be an example of that. So I think you and I agree with each other. I wouldn't go so far as to call it 'brain-washing', but I agree that it involves an attempt to change the way people view themselves and the world.

Wouldn't the meaningful measure be the psychological and physical well-being of a population and not subjective happiness?

Do you have a sense that government policy is maturing past the subjective smiley surveys and are moving toward more meaningful measures like the occurrence of stress-related diseases in addition to using psychological well being instruments?

[BroomCornJohnny](#)

Yes, I think you're right that the methods are advancing rapidly. There's a risk of lumping together the sophisticated techniques with the very unsophisticated ones. I'm not sure how one would distinguish 'psychological wellbeing' from 'subjective happiness', unless the former meant reduced levels of mental health diagnoses. But one intriguing issue (which your comment points towards perhaps) is whether there may be a role for 'objective wellbeing', which is a key idea in development policy and development economics. This involves turning away from subjective experiences altogether, in favour of resources that are needed for a fulfilling life, such as education, political participation, a basic income and so on. I don't know why that doesn't have more purchase in developed countries.

Dr Davies,

I am hugely sympathetic to and supportive of the ideas you've put forward and defended regarding the role of broader social and political structures as determinants of happiness. The obsession with trying to define happiness (or health in general, for that matter) as if such properties could exist in a vacuum seems to be a pervasive problem in current thinking.

My question is - what, if anything, do you think could turn the tide against this methodology which increasingly seeks to locate '*the* cause' for [x] as against a more encompassing, context-sensitive approach? There is a lot of lip-service paid to this kind of thinking, but when it comes down to brass tacks it feels as though most research aims at generalisable 'covering law'-type hypotheses rather than more nuanced analyses which acknowledge limitations of scope and applicability. The way things are now, most papers read as though we have somehow 'got things wrong' if we are unable to arrive at a final analysis which provides something like a universal law. Confounding variables and ineradicable concomitants are painted as obstacles to 'real' science. But isn't it time, especially in the human sciences, that we make space for particularised analyses which may not be applicable across all

contexts but are particularly apt in specific sets of circumstances? To go back to health, for instance, it seems that there will always be a conflict between research that seeks generalisations at a population-level and treatment of patients at an individual level. At present we rely on the experience and judgment of physicians to fill in the blanks, but that appears to be less prudent than conducting research that aims at understanding very specific sets of circumstances. I use health as the model since that is where my research interests lie but I believe these concerns are analogous in any of the human sciences.

Sorry for the rambling question, but I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on this matter.

[wine-o-saur](#)

There are various disciplines which take a more context-sensitive approach, some of which I highlight towards the end of the book. For example, many social epidemiologists, clinical psychologists, psychoanalysts, public health researchers and statisticians are fiercely critical of the surge of individualised happiness metrics. There is plenty of evidence for how things like inequality, excessive working hours, unemployment and collapsing social safety nets contribute to mental distress and ill-health. The question is why do these findings not get more traction, when it comes to influencing policy and business. One reason is that altering individual behaviour and brain chemistry always seems easier than altering political-economic institutions, structures and routines. I think what we need is for professions/disciplines such as clinical psychology and social epidemiology to be actively campaigning for the types of policies (for instance, in relation to education) which they believe will cause less mental distress in the first place, as an alternative to trying to teach people how to be happy or resilient come what may.

When I was in Copenhagen this summer, I had a friend who was explaining the concept of janteloven to me. To summarize it poorly, it's essentially the concept that everybody is better when everybody is similar. This is a sentiment that's carried throughout Scandinavia. My friend suggests that these countries aren't actually the happiest on earth, [despite topping the charts for happiness](#) but instead that the people surveyed there would say that they're happy to avoid sticking out.

How much do you think something like janteloven could skew the results of the happiness index? Is there a way to factor such social codes into the calculation?

Additionally, is there a way to differentiate two countries that may average out the same but with one that's all generally content versus one that is perhaps very polarized with some people very dissatisfied and some extremely content?

Thank you very much for your time and answers!

[RockLikeWar](#)

I hadn't heard of this particular concept or problem. But I think it's an endemic problem with these methodologies. I'm not a specialist in the methods for studying happiness. I'm more of a cultural critic, interested in interrogating why we've come to study happiness in this quantitative, somewhat economic fashion. So I can't really answer your questions. All I would say is that I know the happiness scientists spend a lot of time trying to work these problems out, but of course there is no perfect way of capturing something like happiness. Those that are pragmatic and honest are very open about the limits of their methods.

Dr. Davies,

What role does "chemically-induced" happiness (drugs) have in terms of public policy? Do you see governments essentially handing out happy pills in the future?

Thanks for taking the time to answer some questions.

[M-Thing](#)

I don't think things are heading in that direction, although neuroscientific understanding of pleasure and happiness is advancing all the time. I think the area where things are likely to change most over the next 10-20 years is in affective computing, whereby computers learn how to interpret our emotions via our faces, words, body language etc. This is already becoming embedded in various 'smart' infrastructures, and could play a big role in how things like market research and policing are done in the future. I think the science of happiness is probably less concerned with producing the greatest amount of pleasure (which may indeed involve chemicals) and more concerned with rendering people predictable in their behaviour.

What correlation, if any, have you found between intelligence and happiness?

[ampren7a](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness.

I once heard about a happiness study done across the world and through many, many cultures (quite appropriately, I can't remember where I saw it) whose conclusion was essentially: Children. Have children and you'll be happy.

Has your research given any insights on this?

[Oscuraga](#)

I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My interest is in how we became so preoccupied with happiness, as a matter of scientific study. However, I believe I'm right in saying that the science suggests that having children doesn't actually make you happy. In fact, it makes people less happy, at least to start with. Statistics show that people with children between 5-13 are happier than average, but below 5 or over 13 makes you less happy than average. So maybe adopt a 5-year-old, then kick them out 8 years later :-)

Happiness is such a subjective concept. How were you able to pin down a single vision of happiness for your book or did you utilize a broader definition of happiness? Also, has happiness-driven policy--on the broad scale--resulted in better or worse policy making?

[lawdogslawclerk](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness. So if anything, I'm quite sceptical towards the measures that are out there, though some are undoubtedly better than others.

In most of the first world, many people take anti-depressants. I work in a pharmacy and anti-depressants make up most of our sales. Since happiness has been an obsession of our government and businesses, do you ever foresee a world where people could obtain happiness on their own without the use of antidepressants?

[Shunshundy](#)

One of the arguments in favour of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and positive psychology is that they potentially reduce the need for antidepressants. In Britain, the National Health Service has rapidly increased its provision of 'talking cures' over the past 5 or 6 years, partly thanks to research by happiness economists. On balance, I think that has to be viewed as a positive thing, if the alternative is more medication. A world without antidepressants sounds like something that would be welcome. That said, I'm cautious of being too critical of treatments as such, as I've no doubt that they've saved many lives over the years. I'm fortunate in never having experienced major clinical depression, and wouldn't want to be dismissive of anyone whose misery has been reduced by pharmaceuticals.

I am wondering how you define happiness in this study. There is a big difference between what we mean by happiness as the subjective feeling of fleeting pleasure and what we mean by happiness as objective well being or eudaimonia in greek. You say "optimize our subjective feelings (emotions)", am I right in thinking that you mean to use happiness in this way? What do you think happiness is?

[ineedwine](#)

I should stress that I'm not a happiness researcher myself. My book is a cultural critique and historical analysis of how we came to invest so much hope in a science of happiness. So if anything, I'm quite sceptical towards the measures that are out there, though some are undoubtedly better than others.

I work in happiness creation, making the daily life more enjoyable and creating positive cultural changes is what we do [see The Focallocal Community](www.focallocal.org)

We are able to get funding for projects on specific issues like homelessness, troubled youth, the elderly, etc, but outside of that there doesn't seem to be any support for groups like ours focusing on general happiness in the community, and so the majority of our work is entirely voluntary.

Would you agree that this happiness obsession you talk about is largely confined to research, and not for supporting groups like mine who are actually working on general public 'happiness'

[roamingandy](#)

No, I wouldn't agree. Happiness is now an obsession amongst marketers and managers, who view positive emotion ultimately as a way of influencing how people behave – to buy a product or to work harder or longer. In Britain, positive psychology is being used by the government, to try and reduce people's reliance on welfare and get them into work. Of course, these types of instrumental approaches to happiness may have certain benefits, but they are largely motivated by a desire to make or save money, not by a concern with happiness as such. Your work sounds far more socially valuable than that. But I think the science of happiness has certainly travelled beyond the confines of the research community, and is now heavily instrumentalised by businesses and governments.

Dr Davies, to what degree do you believe the user base of a service like twitter impacts the results of any study on that group's happiness? While there is a large number of people on Twitter, is it possible that the people that lean towards using such a service are already predisposed to either a higher or lower base happiness level than their peers? If so, how does any research attempt to normalize such results, with information such as outside research data?

[Tnwagn](#)

I think that's an endemic problem with social media research techniques. I'm not really the right person

to ask about the intricacies of the methodologies used in that respect. Some would argue that all methodologies encounter cultural problems of that nature, and twitter is no different. But I do think twitter is interesting as a source of data on emotion, in that it is a platform that seems to sustain quite a high level of angst and confrontation. I once heard it said that "nobody is as happy as they seem on facebook, nor as angry as they seem on twitter." That sounds right to me.

Good morning!

I often think about if it would be possible to have a world which is peaceful and "happy" for everyone without giving up a lot of freedom and individuality. I just keep thinking that it's difficult to see a world of happy people without becoming an extremely homogenized and socialist society.

Maybe this is just because the topic always brings me to think of things like brave new world and a clockwork orange. But I would really like to hear the opinion of an expert,

so my question is : "do you think that we could have a world where nearly everyone is happy and peaceful, without giving up individual freedom, what do you think it would require, and should we really be trying to move in that direction?"

[Murfreesboro10](#)

I have to confess, I don't think such a world is possible. I think that is just an unrealistic vision of society and politics. That doesn't mean that the ideal itself isn't useful, if it helps drive people and provide their motivation to seek social change.

Is there any disquiet among people such as yourself who talk about measuring happiness when you must all know that objective measurement is impossible? Or because something like happiness is *purely* subjective do you take people's subjective experience as the only relevant measure? - if you say you're happy then you are. Or am I wrong - do we have objective ways to measure happiness?

[nhingy](#)

I am not a happiness researcher myself. My interest is in the history and roots of our contemporary interest in happiness, as an apparently 'objective' phenomenon. On balance, I probably agree with you, that there is something delusional about the belief in happiness as an object of quantitative science. But I'm interested in understanding why such a science continues to hold such allure for our society.