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Extract from Chapter 3: ‘The power of connecting’

In the previous chapter we considered the value of making things. In this one, we will look at the importance of friendly social connections. It would be easy to think of this as a rather trivial matter: ‘friendly social connections’ may be nice to have, for personal indulgence and a kind of vanity, but they are hardly the stuff of important social science, economics, or social policy. But surely the very opposite is the case: without human empathy, communication, trust, and general-purpose goodwill and friendliness, society would very quickly dissolve in a horrible apocalypse of never-ending misunderstanding, crime, and conflict.

Looked at in that sense, we can see that the value of social connections has been rightly explored by social scientists for over a century in their many and diverse studies of social cohesion, the family, religion, ‘deviance’, economics, social policy, politics, war, terrorism, and other topics. In this chapter we will narrow this field somewhat, then, first of all to the new studies of happiness, which suggest that individuals are more satisfied when they are part of social networks, and secondly to the literature on ‘social capital’ – a sociological term for shared values and connectedness – which shows that we are all, collectively, better off as a society when we are active parts of the social fabric.

Happiness studies

The past decade or so has seen a sharp rise in scholarly interest regarding the topic of ‘happiness’. This is partly because po-faced academics have finally become willing to engage with a term which previously would have been seen, outside of literary and

philosophical studies, as too ‘fluffy’: the sensible researcher of previous generations would have discussed ‘scales of social satisfaction’, or ‘trust’, but would generally have avoided admitting that they were concerned with human happiness. This is perverse, of course, because the question of how to have happy people in a happy society addresses every politician’s dilemma and every social problem.

When people are asked about what would increase our happiness, we typically think that ‘more money’ must be at least *part* of the answer. Indeed, richer people tend to think that they need more additional income than poorer people do (Layard, 2006: 42). However, as happiness researchers have found, people are very bad at predicting what will *actually* make them happy, beyond the instant-hit burst of excitement that they can imagine when various possible treats are suggested to them (Gilbert, 2006; Bennett, 2009).

Meanwhile, the idea that money is not actually a route to happiness has been a well-known and seemingly popular one for some time. In one of his best-known parables, Jesus argued that ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (Matthew 19:23-24). The Beatles echoed the sentiment in their 1964 hit *Can’t Buy Me Love*, and indeed the insignificance of money in the quest for happiness underpins numerous pop songs, such as *Love Don’t Cost A Thing* by Jennifer Lopez and *The Best Things In Life Are Free* by Luther Vandross, movies from *Citizen Kane* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* to *Trading Places* and *Wall Street*, and in particular romantic comedies – for instance, from the many possible examples, it is the ‘message’ of *Notting Hill*, *Two Weeks’ Notice*, and *About A Boy*, all of which happen to star Hugh Grant.

Can’t buy me happiness?

As it turns out, Jesus and the Beatles and Hugh Grant all seem to be right about this one. Indeed, the starting-point for much contemporary happiness research is the observation that almost everybody thinks that they would be happier if they had more money, but that studies demonstrate that this is simply not the case – with the exception of the very poor. In general, when people get more money, they soon get used to it, and return to much the same level of (dis)satisfaction that they were at before (Layard, 2006: 48-9; Taylor, Funk & Craigill, 2006).

There is a good old Marxist argument which says that when religions, movies, or pop songs, suggest that money doesn’t make you any happier, this is a form of propaganda – designed to persuade the impoverished and exploited that their desire for a greater share of society’s wealth is misplaced. The news that more money wouldn’t make us any happier appears to contradict that. However, there are two things worth noting here.

First of all, as mentioned above, increased income *does* make a significant and sustained difference to those people who previously were very poor, living below subsistence level. Secondly, it is *relative* income which makes people more or less happy – if we are getting much less than other people, we are much less happy (Taylor *et al*, 2006). Correspondingly, and rather disappointingly, these same statistics indicate that if an individual became rich, they would only be happier if their position was reasonably unique; if *everyone* became much better-off, they wouldn't all become much happier. This is not a pessimistic hypothesis, but rather can be observed as a matter of historical record: during the twentieth century in America and Europe, for example, the general standard of living rose dramatically. But recorded levels of happiness stayed remarkably constant (Taylor *et al*, 2006; Layard, 2006).

Because people are unrealistic as they imagine their possible futures, and fail to realise that they would simply get used to having more money, they tend to spend more and more time working – which doesn't actually make them happier – and correspondingly less time doing other things. This is, of course, a shame.

Happiness under the microscope

If only we knew which things would *actually* make us more happy – not just in the short term, but as a long-term quality of life kind of factor. But, of course, we do – thanks to the new 'science of happiness', which draws upon economics and psychology. From economics, it takes the idea that you can look at data about a range of social or economic inputs and draw statistical inferences about what has positive or negative results. Unlike traditional economics, though, it does not assume that human behaviour is *necessarily* driven by money and self-interest. From psychology, it takes the idea that people's inner states are important and that personal experience can, in broad terms, be assessed and measured. This new field also draws usefully upon neuroscience, sociology, and philosophy.

Rather than taking happiness as a poetic or romantic concept, the 'new science' takes the presence or absence of happiness as a hard-nosed empirical fact – and a fact with consequences. For example, it has been able to show that happy people live longer than less happy people. This is not because the unhappy people are unhappy about some third factor which is contributing to their early demise. Rather, people with otherwise comparable circumstances seem to be sustained if they have a sunny disposition. One especially memorable analysis, known to experts as 'the nun study,' led by David Snowden, shows this vividly. The study tracks an unusually homogenous group – a set of American Catholic nuns. In the 1930s, when new nuns joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame, they were asked to write an autobiographical sketch. Some 60 years later, researchers looked at 180 of these handwritten accounts, written when the women were

on average 22 years old, which had been kept on file. Rating their autobiographies for amount of 'positive emotional content', they found this to be a strong predictor of longevity. Of those who were alive in 1991, more than half of the those who had written the least cheerful accounts – more than half a century earlier – would die before the end of the decade, whereas those who told a more contented story in their youth had significantly longer lives, with only one in five of nuns in the happiest quarter not making it through the same period (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001). In other words, it seems that happiness, regardless of other factors, means you live longer.

Greatest hits of happiness

Richard Layard, well-known as an economist and now one of the leading authorities on happiness, has drawn upon numerous studies and datasets to produce what he calls the 'Big Seven factors affecting happiness':

- Family relationships
- Financial situation
- Work
- Community and friends
- Health
- Personal freedom
- Personal values

(Layard, 2006: 63)

Layard explains that the first five of these are listed in order of importance, with personal freedom and personal values being additional crucial factors. He observes that except for health and income, these seven factors 'are all concerned with the quality of our relationships' (ibid). Happiness therefore has a lot to do with the social bonds and connectedness that concern us in this book, so let's look at each of the relevant factors in turn.

First of all, it is perhaps no surprise that family relationships appear to have the very strongest relationship with reported levels of happiness. In spite of all the jokes that are commonly made about marriage as a kind of prison or limitation on happiness, data consistently shows that married people are happier than unmarried people, and that the ending of a marriage is generally unmatched as a source of unhappiness. For instance, Layard uses data from the World Values Survey, which covers 90,000 people in 46 countries, and asks people to self-report on their own happiness as well as many other features of their life. From these statistics we can discern that becoming separated from

a spouse has an impact on happiness four times greater than that of a one-third drop in family income. It is worse than becoming unemployed, having a significant decline in health, or living in an undemocratic dictatorship (Layard, 2006: 64–5). This strong finding in favour of ‘marriage’ should not be taken to be an affirmation of heterosexuality, of course. A growing number of countries are enabling same-sex marriage, or ‘civil partnerships’ on a similar basis, and the benefits of these public affirmations of commitment are likely to be exactly the same¹. As Layard explains:

The main benefits of marriage or cohabitation are obvious: you give each other love and comfort; you share resources, gaining economies of scale; you help each other. [...] Married people are healthier and live longer. [...] We need other people, and we need to be needed. Increasingly, research confirms the dominating importance of love.

(Layard, 2006: 66)

This need for social bonds follows through into the third item on Layard’s list, the importance of work. Becoming unemployed has a huge impact on happiness, which is only partially explained by the corresponding drop in income; it is the loss of social relationships and self-esteem associated with work which hit especially hard. Whilst any work tends to provide some sense of purpose, and social connections, the data also shows that work should be *meaningful* in order to add to our happiness. As Layard reports:

Perhaps the most important issue is the extent to which you have control over what you do. There is a creative spark in each of us, and if it finds no outlet, we feel half-dead. This can be literally true: among British civil servants of any given grade, those who do the most routine work experience the most rapid clogging of the arteries.

(Layard, 2006: 68)

All of these things – relationships, self-esteem, meaning – also go to explain why retired people are no more happy than working people (Taylor et al, 2006: 32): they have gained lots of leisure time, but may have also lost a lot of social connections, and the feeling of making some kind of difference.

Fourth in Layard’s ‘Big Seven’ factors affecting happiness is community and friendship. As we will see more below, feeling a part of a helpful and trustworthy community can give a huge lift to people’s general sense of contentment. This theme is perhaps magnified at the more macro level, where the ways in which governments connect with personal and community life add up to the measures of ‘personal

¹ For up-to-date information on the legal status of officially-recognised same-sex partnerships, Wikipedia has a detailed article entitled ‘same-sex marriage’.

freedom', such as corruption, accountability, and effectiveness of government services. These again have a significant impact on happiness.

You might think, for instance, that local government decision-making processes could not possibly have anything to do with happiness, except perhaps that we would be very happy not to have to hear about them. But that is only because we have become used to having no control in that area – it seems boring because it is out of our hands. A study by Frey & Stutzer (1999, 2001) was able to show that actually, where people had power in this sphere, it affected the mood across the whole population. Their research looked at Switzerland, which is divided into 26 cantons, and where policy issues are frequently decided by referendum – but to varying degrees. In the cantons where citizens had the most rights to referendums, compared with those where these rights were least, the difference in happiness was as great as if they had double the income. Living in a place where it was relatively easy to get the signatures necessary to trigger the mechanisms of direct democracy had a clear and sizeable impact on the happiness of the people in that canton – not just the people launching referendums, but the whole population (Frey & Stutzer, 1999: 11–12).

Finally, on Layard's list of factors affecting happiness, there is 'personal values', in other words our inner self and philosophy of life. One of the most consistent findings of happiness research, for instance, is that people who believe in God are happier than those who do not. It is possible that happy people are more likely to believe in God, rather than the belief causing happiness, at an individual level, but Layard asserts that 'since the relation also exists at the national level, we can be sure that to some extent belief causes happiness' (Layard, 2006: 72). A study by the Pew Research Center in the US (nothing, in fact, to do with church pews) seemed to find a similar connection between religion and happiness – although the finding may be more to do with the social bonds of church *attendance*. 'People who attend religious services weekly or more are happier (43% very happy) than those who attend monthly or less (31%); or seldom or never (26%),' they report (Taylor et al, 2006: 6). They also note that this correlation 'has been a consistent finding in the General Social Surveys taken over the years' (ibid). Even amongst those of the same religious faith, actually *going* to church makes a very significant difference to reported levels of happiness. Church attendance may reinforce faith, which, as we have seen, makes people happier, but it also involves regular participation in a local network of goodwill and community, which – as we have also seen – is a strong propagator of happiness.

Get a project

Looking at Layard's 'big seven', we might think that all we need to do to attain a super level of happiness would be to align a reasonable number of these factors around

ourselves and simply wait for the happiness to flow in. If we move to an especially democratic canton in Switzerland, get married, turn up regularly at work and church, invite some friends round, and get some decent medical and financial advice, we should be able to score 100 per cent happiness.

However, although all of these things might help to *support* our efforts, happiness does not follow from passive participation. Similarly, the idea that you can be happier if you merely lower your expectations, doesn't really work. People need something to strive towards. Richard Layard puts it very nicely: 'Prod any happy person and you will find a project' (2006: 73). As Tibor Scitovsky argued in *The Joyless Economy* (1976), individuals in modern societies tend to have reasonable amounts of money and free time, but this is no good if they are simply bored. Traditional economics has tended to be blind to such issues, since it would assume that gains in money and leisure are inherently positive.

However, happiness researchers such as Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade (2005) are able to point to a number of studies which demonstrate that goal-oriented activities are a major contributor to happiness. Indeed, comparative studies have shown that the intentionality of *choosing* to do a particular activity adds considerably to the pleasure, when compared to pleasant changes in circumstance which have merely happened (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2009). And, unlike most things that give a boost to happiness – even marriage – the pleasure of working on projects does not fade over time (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005: 118–120; Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009: 671–673). You could say that this statistic is a little unfair, as people can readily create new and stimulating projects for themselves, whereas exciting new marriages, or delightful new homes, say, cannot be generated easily, and come with costs. But such is the nature of projects: easy to create, and a source of pleasure, even when you haven't really done anything about them.

Happiness, then, is about family, community, and well-being. It cannot be determined by a certain level of material comfort. Instead, it stems from having meaningful connections with others, and meaningful things to do. These projects are especially valuable if they are not contained at the individual level but involve some form of sharing, cooperation, or contribution to other people's well-being. As Richard Layard says at the beginning of the conclusion to his *Happiness* book:

A society cannot flourish without some sense of shared purpose. The current pursuit of self-realisation will not work. If your sole duty is to achieve the best for yourself, life becomes just too stressful, too lonely – you are set up to fail. Instead, you need to feel you exist for something larger, and that very thought takes off some of the pressure.

(Layard, 2006: 234)

This means we need to broaden our focus from individual happiness to activities within the social fabric more generally.

Social capital

The happiness research has indicated factors which typically make individuals happier, and which can often be encouraged or stimulated at government level, thereby helping society as a whole to be happier. For instance, support can be given to couples and families – in the form of tax breaks and financial help, centres and activities for parents and children, and relationship support – and the benefits of marriage can be extended to same-sex couples. Governments also obviously play a crucial role in the stability and legislation of work; support for and prevention of ill-health; and in levels of freedom and active democracy. So, although the government can't 'make you happy' *per se*, it can give support to some of the structures that might help to foster individual happiness.

A slightly different way of looking at similar issues is found in the literature on 'social capital'. This also begins with individuals, in the sense that social well-being is a responsibility of us all, and then it tends to reach towards a more inclusive, participatory, community-based view of the solutions. 'Social capital' has become a buzzword amongst policy-makers and think-tanks since the 1990s, so there is again a question of what the state can do to support social capital – but also an idea that social capital might help the state. The 'happiness' and 'social capital' studies are not mutually exclusive fields: the research mentioned above which suggests that collaboration and social projects are good for happiness, for instance, might be absolutely central to social capital scholars making their case.

Compared to 'happiness', 'social capital' is a less self-explanatory term, and – as is often the way with academic jargon – is understood differently by different writers. Before we look at the different approaches, I will try to outline the meaning of the term in a general way. It started life as a metaphorical mirror of financial capital: just as a supply of money can enable you to do things that you otherwise could not do, a stock of social relationships will also make it easier to do things that otherwise you could not. These relationships are central to the smooth running of a society. L. J. Hanifan, who seems to have been the first person to use the term, wrote in 1916:

The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself... If he comes into contact with his neighbour, and they with other neighbours, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may... bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while

the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbours.

(Hanifan, 1916, quoted in Putnam, 2000: 19)

Hanifan's notion of 'social capital' failed to capture the general imagination at that time, and remained generally invisible for several more decades. Indeed, those who started talking about social capital from the 1980s onwards may well have been ignorant of this earlier usage. However, Hanifan's outline of social capital is remarkably close to its accepted use today. It is worth clarifying that social capital (being about social networks and relationships) is distinct from other forms of non-financial capital that people might talk about these days, such as human capital (individual expertise), physical capital (equipment), and cultural capital (individual cultural knowledge). The thing that these different forms of capital all have in common – the thing that makes them 'capital' rather than just 'know-how' – is that they are all used to create further capital.

Generally, the social capital writers are concerned with social relationships based on cooperation, reciprocity, goodwill, and trust, oriented towards a society that's nice for everybody to live in. Inevitably, they generally have to admit that there is a 'dark side' to social capital as well: even the most brutal, selfish, antisocial person tends to have social networks, and indeed they can achieve their goals much more efficiently if they have a good stock of social relationships. The advocates of 'social capital' would be in favour of mutually supportive community groups of enthusiasts with shared interests, but the Ku Klux Klan is a mutually supportive community group of enthusiasts with shared interests. So although social capital can seem like a wonderful 'happy glue' for society, solving all its problems, its functions are not *necessarily* always wholesome, kind and ethical. Nevertheless, the social capital literature does seem to suggest a path towards a better society, which we should not dismiss just because there are – as always – possible antisocial applications of the idea.

Three approaches to social capital

[Continues...]

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