
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Mak Arvin is a Full Professor of Economics at Trent University, Canada, where he has been a faculty member for over 32 years. He is the author of over 170 papers, reviews, and books. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Happiness and Development* and *International Journal of Education Economics and Development*. He has been a Visiting Professor at Boston College and Consultant to the IFO Institute in Germany. His research focuses on development and international economics.

1 Factors affecting happiness

On the occasion of the publication of the fifth volume of *IJHD*, this editorial is devoted to defining happiness and the factors it may depend on. It concludes with a summary of strategies and policies that may elevate individual and societal happiness.

Happiness here is defined in the sense of life satisfaction. The latter is lifetime evaluations as opposed to emotional reports, which refer to current or recent feelings of joy or sadness. Happiness is taken as a broad concept, including individual and societal satisfaction within various domains of life or society. The set of individual strategies and policies are presented here at both the micro level (i.e., those that enhance individual happiness) as well as at the macro level (i.e., those likely to yield higher happiness for the greatest number of citizens).

Among other things, happiness likely depends on the following *inter-related* broad factors:

- 1 physical and mental health and medical care
- 2 basic needs: food, shelter, and clothing
- 3 empowerment and opportunity
- 4 knowledge
- 5 family connections
- 6 other connections, networks, and support: friends, colleagues, communities
- 7 success.

This opinion piece comments briefly on each of these factors. Based on the discussion of the factors below, the paper concludes with a summary list of 25 strategies and policies that I believe to be most effective in enhancing happiness.

1 Physical and mental health and medical care

Without physical or mental health, life satisfaction becomes challenging. Therefore, putting in place measures that ensure optimum health outcomes at an early stage of life (e.g., through maternal well-being and vaccination programs) supported by efficient and accessible healthcare systems are of paramount importance. In addition, steps to improve work-life balance among employees, reduce workplace stress, improve job satisfaction, and promote a healthier and more supportive work environment are desirable. Although some degree of publicly-provided healthcare is required in societies, individuals should be incentivised to be proactive in their own physical and mental well-being in order to reduce strain on the healthcare system. It is possible that the link in this factor is bi-directional as good health outcomes not only cause happiness, but happiness causes good health. Related to good health outcomes are also environmental factors: ensuring that there is clean air and access to clean water, abating pollution, and reducing traffic and housing congestion are likely positive steps in elevating happiness. In addition, societies that invest in improved public transportation may turn out to be happier.

2 Basic needs: food, shelter, and clothing

Meeting the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing are keys to ensuring happy individuals and societies. These come with having access to adequate income, which is discussed under the next point. However, note that individuals tend to over-value money and under-value time. Having time available outside of work is important to individuals' physical and mental well-being. Increasing vacation days and reducing the number of hours worked each year are likely to contribute to increased happiness without compromising the basic needs of the citizens.

3 Empowerment and opportunity

Empowerment is having a reasonable set of choices and the ability to make choices freely. It includes economic, political, and personal freedom. Empowerment is linked to income, employment, and job security, but also to civic engagement such as freedom of speech and living and working without fear of discrimination or intimidation. Opportunities are meant to improve one's unique situation, e.g., universal child care; access to secular education; support to upgrade/complete education; ability to gain quality and stable employment; mentorship. Since individuals adapt to their situations, increasing opportunities for advancement become important in elevating their happiness. Policy implications to improve happiness under this all-encompassing heading are obvious: promoting gender equality, enabling greater autonomy for marginalised groups, reducing corruption and favouritism, increasing law and order, removing barriers to promotion, and taking steps towards a more inclusive society – one with more tolerant social norms and one that could be regarded as just and fair with opportunities for individuals to participate and advance through stronger public institutions. Finally, although income and wealth empower individuals, so do increased general economic and political stability. For example, the increased uncertainty and the fall-out from the recent Brexit referendum has probably had a pernicious impact on the British level of happiness, through creating political and societal divisions within the country and reducing opportunities, especially for younger citizens. Moreover, addressing

persistent or increasing income inequality is likely to be important for individuals' happiness.

4 Knowledge

Knowledge is obtained through formal education, interaction with elders, or self-directed learning. Education not only raises one's income potential but also the capacity to understand and appreciate various aspects of life. Knowledge is often passed on through families, raising the importance of the family unit (see the next point). Knowledge also enables individuals to make rational or better decisions. Some individuals may be both resource and information constrained. For example, if individuals are driven to keep up with the Joneses, by purchasing luxury items or even homes that they cannot afford, they may be saddled with payments for many years and as a consequence, their happiness may be adversely affected. In this situation, government policy would be better directed in educating individuals through non-profit financial planning centres and rather than providing financial incentives for home ownership. This is especially important in today's economy since many individuals have saddled themselves with expensive homes to take advantage of historically low interest rates. Should these rates rise, these individuals' levels of happiness may plummet. Finally, under policy, greater knowledge may be facilitated through universal access to broadband, which facilitates internet usage. The latter affects how individuals live, work, learn and communicate. Broadband internet allows knowledge to be made available to a larger audience. Access to broadband internet may have a profound impact on the citizen's happiness, especially in developing countries and for those living in remote or rural areas.

5 Family

Family (spouse, partner, parents, siblings, and relatives) is important. Note that marriage not only affects happiness, but the reverse is also true: happier people tend to get married. For children, life disruptions associated with parental divorce may lead to diminished resilience and negatively impact their happiness, while good parental unions are likely to yield an opposite outcome. Useful policies would include incentives for the formation and preservation of stronger families.

6 Other connections, networks, and support: friends, colleagues, communities

A sense of belonging and a feeling of being needed as well being supported beyond the family circle are likely to increase happiness. Stronger links with friends, colleagues, communities¹ – and the ability to draw support from them is likely to make individuals happier. Useful policies include additional incentives for the formation and operation of communities and support groups, both religious and secular, in order to improve individuals' social life. This is important especially for the disadvantaged or marginalised members of the society. These communities and support groups can encourage individuals to work toward a goal and achieving it – which will likely be happiness enhancing. However, it is not just receiving that matters. The act of giving also makes a difference. Individuals are likely happier when they contribute to the well-being of their friends, colleagues and communities, and when they perform generous or pro-social acts such as making charitable donations to support others. Additional tax incentives to promote charitable giving,

providing opportunities for volunteerism, and ways to acknowledge volunteerism will all likely be positive steps in elevating individuals' and nations' levels of happiness. As well, means of fostering trust, gratefulness, and social interactions in society will likely be fruitful. At a more macro and international level, increased foreign aid may make not only the citizens of recipient countries happier, but may have a positive outcome on the level of happiness of donor nations. In the same vein, facilitating increased foreign remittances may have a beneficial effect on the level of both donors and recipients.

7 Success

Success is an important domain in individuals' lives which likely affects their life satisfaction. It is related to all the points discussed above. That is, it is correlated with physical and mental health, empowerment and opportunity, knowledge, family and other connections as well as drive, ambition, and maintaining a positive outlook in life (which may be supported through friends, colleagues and communities). Note that success can be a relative concept. For instance, one can be a successful beggar *relative* to other beggars and yet be happier than an individual who is better off.

Two other points are in order:

- a Policy makers have to consider whether there is a satiation point with respect to each of the policy measures outlined above. For example, with regards to increasing expenditure to elevate physical and mental health, is there a critical level of expenditure beyond which the relationship is qualitatively different? Does happiness reach a satiation point once basic needs are met, et cetera?
- b One may not be able to have universal policy prescriptions that would apply to all individuals and countries at all times. For example, empowering women is more important in lesser developed countries than in developed countries; support for working individuals who have to look after their ageing parents is more important in countries where the state provides minimal direct support for the elderly; increased life expectancy will make citizens happier in countries where there is sufficient support for them in their golden years; numerous children may be a source of increased happiness in some countries rather than others as a result of cultural differences in marriage and life's purpose; et cetera. Additionally, since research suggests that happiness is U-shaped through the life cycle, reaching a minimum at some stage in peoples' lives, providing additional support for individuals at some critical juncture becomes especially important.

Finally, policy prescriptions at an international level would be formally augmenting the United Nation's human development index (HDI) with a 'happiness' component, one that is consistent with an expanded notion of well-being that considers both objective and subjective well-being. Since governments around the globe appear to pay attention to their country's HDI rankings, augmenting HDI with a happiness component would force governments to pay more than lip service to elevating the happiness of their citizens.

2 Summary of 25 strategies and policies that may improve happiness

Most of these strategies and policies as key drivers of happiness are *inter-related*. They also illustrate that happiness is not a goal, but rather a by-product (Roosevelt, 1960).

- 1 Improve the delivery and overall efficiency of the healthcare system.
- 2 Improve work-life balance for workers, reduce workplace stress, improve job satisfaction, and promote a healthier and more supportive work environment.
- 3 Reduce pollution: Procure cleaner air and access to clean water.
- 4 Reduce traffic and housing congestion and improve public transportation.
- 5 Assist individuals to meet the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing by facilitating job creation, as well as maintaining low unemployment and inflation.
- 6 Afford individuals time: Increase leisure time through augmenting vacation time and reducing the number of hours worked each year.
- 7 Empower individuals through better governance resulting in freedom of speech, reduction in corruption, the absence of discrimination or intimidation, increase in law and order, gender equality, greater autonomy for marginalised groups, and more tolerance and inclusiveness in society.
- 8 Provide opportunities for individuals to participate in society through stronger public institutions.
- 9 Ensure a just and fair way in which individuals can advance throughout their lives (in their careers and in the business of their everyday lives).
- 10 Ensure general economic and political stability. Macroeconomic volatility may especially be happiness decreasing in countries that are not used to them.
- 11 Address persistent or increasing income inequality.
- 12 Increase access to opportunities designed to improve one's unique situation, e.g., universal child care; access to secular education; support to upgrade/complete education; support to gain quality and stable employment; mentorship.
- 13 Increase knowledge through formal education, elders, or self-directed learning.
- 14 Assist individuals in making rational decisions. For example, encourage home rental over ownership and diminish incentives for ownership when the housing market is hot and when carrying mortgages is beyond the ability of individuals in the long run. Some individuals may be both resource and information constrained.
- 15 Increase access to broadband. This is important especially in developing countries and for those living in rural or remote areas. The transformative power of broadband which facilitates high-speed internet has an impact on the way individuals live, work, learn, and communicate.
- 16 Provide incentives for the formation and preservation of stronger families.

- 17 Increase the individual's sense of belonging and feeling of being needed as well being supported.
- 18 Provide incentives for the formation and support of communities and groups, in order to improve individuals' social life. This is especially important for the disadvantaged or marginalised members of society.
- 19 Promote generous or pro-social acts such as making donations of time and money to support others. Give additional tax incentives to promote charitable giving, provide opportunities for volunteerism, and acknowledge volunteerism.
- 20 Assist individuals in working toward a goal and achieving it. Act as a catalyst to bring about success for individuals, which is an important domain in their life satisfaction.
- 21 Foster trust, gratefulness, and social interactions in society.
- 22 Increase foreign aid and support foreign remittances.
- 23 Tailor policies based on the needs and cultural contexts of the country or society. There may be no universal answers that apply to all countries and societies.
- 24 Target stages in peoples' lives when happiness is relatively lower. If individuals' happiness reaches a minimum during their mid-life, address the underlying factors that cause a drop (e.g., assist individuals who are compelled to meet the increasing needs of their children and ageing parents simultaneously).
- 25 At an international level, augment the UN's HDI with a happiness component to entice policymakers to pay more attention to their citizens' level of happiness.

References

Roosevelt, E. (1960) *You Learn by Living*, Harpers & Row Publishers, New York.

Notes

- 1 Communities are a general moniker that captures everything from neighbourhoods to religious congregations to other shared-interest communities. Examples of shared-interest communities (groups) include:
 - Civic communities – e.g., participation in local, city, provincial, federal politics or interest groups (e.g., airport expansion).
 - Creative communities – e.g., music, theatre, dance.
 - Occupational communities – e.g., employer, profession, union, trade.
 - Recreational communities – e.g., card-playing, reading/cooking clubs.
 - Spiritual communities – e.g., place of worship (e.g., church, synagogue) or method of practice (e.g., yoga).
 - Sporting communities – e.g., baseball, badminton, soccer.
 - Virtual (online) communities – e.g., Bebo, Facebook, Reddit.
 - Volunteer communities – e.g., charitable organisations, local (soup kitchen), regional (hospital) or international (Rotary/Kiwanis).