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## ‘Not Smiling but Frowning’: Sociology and the ‘Problem of Happiness’

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## **'Not Smiling but Frowning': Sociology and the 'Problem of Happiness'**

### **Abstract**

Mainstream British sociology has curiously neglected happiness studies despite growing interest in wellbeing in recent years. Sociologists often view happiness as a problematic, subjective phenomenon, linked to problems of modernity such as consumerism, alienation and anomie. This construction of 'happiness as a problem' has a long history from Marx and Durkheim to contemporary writers such as Ahmed and Furedi. Using qualitative interview data I illustrate how lay accounts of happiness suggest it is experienced in far more 'social' ways than these traditional subjective constructions. We should therefore be wary of using crude representations of happiness as vehicles for our traditional depictions of modernity. Such 'thin' accounts of happiness have inhibited a serious sociological engagement with the things that really matter to ordinary people such as our efforts to balance suffering and flourishing in our daily lives.

Key words: ethics, happiness, narcissism, sociology, wellbeing

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## **Introduction**

Being happy is a key feature of life in most societies today. Yet strangely there has been little sustained analysis of the nature of happiness by mainstream British Sociologists (1). In this paper I suggest that this neglect of happiness research is rooted in how sociologists often construct happiness as something that is predominantly a subjective, positive phenomenon that has emerged with the wider development of western modernity. Happiness tends to be seen as superficial, fleeting, emotional experiences as we see in the joy of shopping or pleasures of eating and drinking. Happiness then can be simultaneously banal and also linked to the problems of modernity –for example our fixation on the ‘quick-fix’ highs of consumerism. Happiness therefore is often viewed as problematic by sociologists as it distracts us from more significant underlying social processes that shape our lives, obscuring more authentic ways of experiencing life. I illustrate this through a discussion of the recent work of Frank Furedi (2004) and Sara Ahmed (2010). This way of using the concept of happiness does seem plausible, seeing it as a manifestation of the individualism that characterises modernity and hence something for the sociological imagination to critique. ‘Happiness as a problem’ then, is part of a wider set of powerful narratives that structure our discipline. However, my empirical research suggests that ordinary people offer more complex accounts of what happiness means to them in everyday life. Indeed, my interview data suggested that respondents often understood and experienced happiness in ways similar to classical writings on flourishing or Eudaimonia (Aristotle, 2009). It can involve the balance of good and bad experiences; something that one works at over time; something that is shared or struggled over; or something that is imagined and internal to the self.

I suggest that sociologists pay too much attention to individualised notions of wellbeing such as happiness as ‘good feeling’. Thus the categorisation of wellbeing into popular everyday understandings (happiness), scientific subjective (subjective wellbeing) and structural factors (social indicators or causal processes) hinders efforts to research wellbeing in everyday life. In what follows I dispense with these customary ways of defining and discussing happiness and wellbeing (I use these terms inter-changeably) and employ a more Aristotelian formulation of happiness that more accurately reflects my empirical data and which include both fleeting subjective dimensions of wellbeing (Hedonia) and more enduring processes of flourishing (Eudaimonia).

## **The Contemporary interest in Happiness**

There has been a growing interest in happiness in the guise of subjective wellbeing (SWB) since the 1950s as the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1948) developed ways of measuring and promoting the quality of life of people around the globe. The origins of SWB lie in emotional/affective experiences of actors and these draw their influence from classical Greek writings on pleasure/desires or

so-called, 'hedonic', aspects of happiness (McMahon, 2006: 46). This work by WHO reflected a desire to augment economic indicators of development with other positive subjective measures and transcend traditional deficit models that focus on reducing suffering. However, these personal or subjective measures of wellbeing imply the existence of wider social structures that enable/constrain actors and can be the *source* of individual wellbeing. Hence contemporary theorists such as Sen and Nussbaum in their capabilities approach conceptualise the multiple levels of wellbeing (and with it, ideas of a 'good life') that may involve structural features such as civil rights and economic growth that can promote/hinder more personal aspects of subjective wellbeing (Sen and Nussbaum, 1993; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 147). This work has informed many international wellbeing surveys that measure the happiness of individuals in relation to objective societal features that then feed into policy debates and initiatives (World Values Survey, 2013). In the UK, longitudinal panel surveys (Bradshaw, 2012) have also used these measures to inform policy debates around wellbeing enhancement.

Since the 1990s this interest in wellbeing has grown with the development of positive psychology (Argyle, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and behavioural economics (Graham and Oswald, 2010; Kahneman et al., 2003; Seligman, 2002). These question the usual assumptions about economic growth and increasing affluence creating happier individuals and societies. This research, drawing on classical work on happiness has documented how objective experiences (through work, leisure and marriage) can in fact have complex meanings and influence wellbeing in unpredictable ways. In the UK Layard (2005) has popularised the idea that notions of a 'good society' should include a complex conception of subjective/objective wellbeing as well as those around economic growth and material prosperity. This work has been influential in encouraging many governments and organisations to develop happiness surveys and policies at local and national levels (NEF, 2013; ONS, 2013; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

This research and debate has contributed to an outpouring of books, films and therapy programmes that focus on finding happiness. Some of these draw on religious principles for inspiration, whilst others utilise positive psychology to create plans, tips and guides for happier living (Ben-Sharar, 2008; Hoggard, 2005; Wilkinson, 2007). Many people as a result have become more conscious of wellbeing, reflected in a more emotionalized language of resilience, flourishing and a concern with leading happier lives.

### **Some Sociological Representations of Happiness**

Some sociologists have been keen to integrate notions of wellbeing (such as life satisfaction and quality of life) into their work, notably in the fields of development and globalisation (Yew-Kwang and Lok Sang, 2006), employment (Warr and Wall, 1975), health (Baldwin et al., 1994; Bradshaw, 2011), young people (Robb, 2007) and longitudinal studies of household change (Gershuny, 2012). These uses of wellbeing allow for the analysis of various domains of life whilst avoiding the normative assumptions that inform more popular notions of subjective wellbeing that regard happiness as a moral imperative. Quantitative

methodologies however have tended to dominate this work and with it concerns for the measurement and causes of subjective wellbeing which can abstract from our more nuanced everyday experiences of happiness (White, 2009; Hyman, 2010), (2). Though these survey approaches have generated some valuable insights there is a need for more qualitative and biographical research that explores happiness as a social process involving struggle and negotiation in everyday life.

Some sociologists are far more sceptical about wellbeing research, seeing the growth in the self-help industry and the idea of happiness as personal life project as overly reductionist and normative. Marcuse's work on 'One Dimensional Man/Society' (2002) depicts the growing pre-occupation with happiness in affluent societies as an expression of more subtle and pernicious forms of domination. Marcuse's vision is like Huxley's *Brave New World* (2007), of people sleepwalking through life, sedated by a shallow consumerism that offers false promises of lasting happiness. Cohen and Taylor (1976) echo Marcuse's concerns charting the ways that people, 'fit in' with the demands of ordinary life and the ultimate disenchantment this can bring. The argument here is that increasingly people hold simplistic ideas of what happiness is and how to attain it and this is problematic as it is linked to underlying processes of domination and the corrosion of authentic, political, and cultural ways of existence. This approach to happiness is also evident in more recent sociology. Bauman (2008) views the popularity of simplistic ideas about happiness (as subjective good feeling) as key to sustaining the fluid, dynamic cultures that constitute liquid modernity. The promise of happiness through consumer goods and lifestyles creates the illusion of freedom and autonomy behind which lies a reality of restless citizens seeking out an elusive contented way of life. For Hochschild too (2003) happiness is also problematic - hollowed out and losing its deeper meanings and significance because of longer-term socio-cultural processes of instrumentalisation and commodification. For her the performance of (un)happiness is a major feature of modernity. Paid work and caring relationships require us to work on our emotions so that appearing happy and pursuing happy lives are major responsibilities and constitute the 'feeling rules' that frame modern life.

These studies have been very successful in creating an academic discourse that constructs happiness as a set of simplistic, positive and subjective experiences and that sociologists need to focus not on the epiphenomena of happiness but on the underlying 'causal' processes (values, power, socialisation) that influence wellbeing. This mechanistic, fragmented way of portraying and researching wellbeing has hindered a more creative, empirically grounded engagement with the everyday experiences of happiness. We should be more open to the empirical complexity of happiness where happiness is much more of a social, collective process that involves everyday decision-making as individuals navigate their way through life, trying to flourish.

### **The origins of 'happiness as a problem'**

One can trace the origins of these more sceptical sociological approaches to happiness to the works of Marx (1984) and Durkheim (1991) (3). Here we see the differentiation between popular, common sense notions of wellbeing as happiness and more 'critical' depictions of wellbeing and its socio-structural causes. In a famous passage Marx writes of the way that, 'religion offers only an illusion of happiness' (1844) illustrating how for Marx, happiness and religion are interwoven and deeply problematic, working to obscure more authentic and critical ways of living. Space precludes a detailed discussion here, but Marx and Durkheim suggest that modern societies are adept at creating new wants and desires and promoting an individualism that identifies the pursuit of materialistic goals as the route to happiness. Significantly, these early sociological approaches offer us an enduring model whereby an interest in positive experiences of happiness is transformed into an analysis of suffering.

Both Marx and Durkheim were critical of Utilitarian thinkers such as Bentham and Mill who popularised individualistic ideas about social progress and happiness, developing instead their well-known insights into the social origins of wellbeing (4). Much of Durkheim's work was pre-occupied with establishing how social relationships (or the moral order) can endure in modern societies so that they can ensure the 'health' of the individual and wider community. To avoid the 'ill-being' of anomie individuals and communities require relationships that offer appropriate regulation (of desires) as well as integration (participation in reciprocal relationships). For Durkheim the education system and its promotion of discipline was a major way in which the moral order becomes internalised, producing self-regulation and the management of personal desires needed for enduring happiness.

Discipline is, in other words, not only useful in the interest of society and the indispensable means without which there can be no regulated co-operation. It is in the interest of the individual too, for it teaches us that restraint in our wishes, without which humans cannot be happy. (Durkheim, 1973: 101, quoted in Vowinckel, 2000: 454)

Marx's writings on alienation also illustrate how he saw wider social relationships as the basis of positive wellbeing. If individuals can exercise control over their labour, use it creatively to generate things of 'use' rather than for exchange, then individuals have a chance of flourishing in life. Yet the dynamism of economic relationships and the pursuit of profit meant that Marx saw little hope of such positive wellbeing emerging from waged employment, for a worker,

Does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. (Marx, 1983: 139)

These analyses of the rise of individualism, the growth of egoistic conceptions of happiness and critiques of empiricist-reductionism theories established a powerful formula for many later sociological approaches to happiness. Such a legacy I believe has hindered a more creative sociological engagement with happiness.

## **Redefining happiness: social happiness, flourishing and practical reasoning**

One aim of this paper is to challenge the scepticism that many sociologists feel about happiness research and call for a more creative sociological engagement with wellbeing in people's lives. Though to do this we do need to rethink how we define happiness, acknowledging that it is a slippery concept that has subjective dimensions as well as being used to represent collaborative activities, processes and practices. I began this project as sociological accounts of subjective wellbeing often seemed at odds with the complexity and ambiguity of my own experiences as well as those from literature and film. It seems paradoxical that so much of what is written about happiness by academics becomes a vehicle for the analysis of suffering. My dissatisfaction with sociological representations of happiness led me to examine pre-modern accounts of wellbeing (McMahon, 2006) and how ancient thinkers viewed happiness as a far more social phenomenon, co-produced and collective rather than the individualised notion we see today. Aristotle (2009) viewed happiness much more as a concrete, grounded activity (praxis) whereby individuals make ongoing choices about how best to live their daily lives. This idea of happiness as flourishing (Eudaimon) implies reflexivity and monitoring of our wellbeing. Hence judgements we make about what happiness means to us and how we evaluate courses of action inevitably involve having had good and bad experiences in the past and being able to creatively reflect on these. Aristotle observes therefore, that it is nonsensical to suggest that people could regard happiness solely as a positive emotional state, for the good in our lives takes its meaning and significance from the challenges, struggle and suffering we have to endure. This way of understanding happiness offers us much more scope to research wellbeing imaginatively than the crude depictions developed by many sociologists. Andrew Sayer (2011) has made similar observations noting how in sociology we have a preponderance of 'thin', 'theoretical' accounts of wellbeing that feature over-socialised individuals whose values and ethical conduct appear as crude reflections of wider discourses and value systems. Such representations abstract from the everyday praxis of 'lay normativity' and the struggle to flourish. He calls for many more qualitative research projects on wellbeing that offer insights into the richness of lay normativity and with it the very things that really matter to us as humans (5).

### **Biographies and researching happiness**

As classical writings on happiness suggest it is a social, processual and biographical phenomenon I developed a set of methods and theories that could capture some of these situated and contingent dimensions. I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 20 participants that reflected key differences in resources and opportunities (of social class and gender) and by four age categories in the life course (18-30 years of age; 31-50; 51-65; and 66 and above). As happiness can be experienced fleetingly (joy) in an unreflective way yet also have enduring features (contentment) that imply some reflection on notions of a 'good life'/'good society', I asked interviewees to complete a happiness diary. Here they wrote about the positive/negative experiences they



had and rated these on a ten-point scale. We also constructed happiness maps that provided a snap-shot of wellbeing in different domains (work, education, leisure, family) as well as biographical maps charting the wellbeing of respondents that featured discussions of schooling, family experiences, employment, intimate relationships, parenting and health issues.

I used Bourdieu's concepts of capitals, fields and habitus (1986) to theorise wellbeing in relation to the differential resources and opportunities of respondents. The concept of biography (Hockey and James, 2003) as well as critical realist theory (Archer, 1988) were used to understand how structure and agency are interwoven and influence the social identities and life course transitions of individuals. Notions of critical moments and coping strategies were used to explore how individuals managed structural conditioning. I also asked each respondent to complete a battery of standard wellbeing questionnaires to provide numerical data on their relative wellbeing that allowed for some simple numerical comparisons between respondents.

The research was guided by the principles of grounded theory (Glazer and Corbin, 1998) that I have used successfully in other projects to ensure methodological rigour (Author, 2007). Sampling and interviewing were shaped by a desire to investigate the empirical representations of happiness made by sociologists yet I was also open to other data and insights about wellbeing. Simultaneous analysis and data generation was undertaken and analytical themes were explored and tested to ensure they were grounded in data across the sample of respondents. Nvivo software was used to interrogate the data to systematically produce analytical categories.

In this paper I use some data to contrast the complex ways that happiness is experienced by my interviewees with those simpler accounts we often find in mainstream sociology. I undertake a more detailed discussion elsewhere of how happiness, class, age and gender are related (Author, 2015 forthcoming).

### **Happiness, narcissism and therapy culture?**

Frank Furedi's book, *Therapy Culture* (2004) is a notable example of how happiness is presented simplistically and as a problem and one which I wish to critique. Furedi echoes Lasch (1979) and Nolan (1998) suggesting that popular psychology and a language of emotions increasingly frame our understandings of everyday life. For Furedi the emergence of a 'therapy culture' promotes a narcissistic, inward-looking sensibility that produces a sense of vulnerability about everyday events that are experienced as psychological risks. This way of living is corrosive, Furedi tells us, as it hinders our engagement with the world, makes us dependent on therapy professionals and generates superficial conceptions of wellbeing and flourishing. One feature of therapy culture is a profound narrowing of people's experiences and understanding of wellbeing so that it is more superficial and instrumental than in the past.

One of the most distinct features of our emotional script is its celebration of happiness and contentment... The emphasis which our emotional script

attaches to feeling good about oneself is a distinct feature of contemporary culture. It is underpinned by an outlook that regards the individual self as the central focus of social, moral and cultural preoccupation... Since feeling good is regarded as a state of virtue, forms of behaviour that distract the individual from attending to the needs of the self, are frequently devalued. Consequently, traditionally held virtues such as hard work, sacrifice, altruism and commitment are frequently represented as antithetical to the quest of the individual for the feeling of happiness (Furedi, 2004: 31)

As we see with other sociological approaches from Marx through to the Frankfurt School and Bauman, Furedi suggests that happiness is experienced as a subjective 'good feeling' and something that people try and maximise while limiting the negative experiences they have. This narrow form of happiness has become a problem, Furedi suggests, as we have become obsessed with its pursuit, driven in part by our anxieties about feeling and appearing unhappy, that are fuelled in turn by a happiness-fixated popular culture and a powerful therapy and wellbeing industry.

'Sacrifice, loss, achievement and working at happiness'

The problem with broad-brush sociological analyses such as Furedi's is they abstract from the many different ways that happiness is understood and experienced by ordinary people. As classical philosophers (Schooch, 2007) and more recent researchers have documented (Layard, 2005) happiness can mean personal fun, pleasure, and joy (a Hedonic form) yet it can also involve a dynamic balance of positive/negative experiences that emerge from longer-term activity (an Eudaimonic form). My interview data points to these myriad understandings of happiness. When asked about the experience/understanding of happiness interviewees cited all manner of positive subjective, individualised events, listening to music, exercising, having sex and drinking alcohol. Yet all interviewees, irrespective of their age, gender or class background also cited numerous examples where a positive subjective wellbeing was linked to 'working at something' or 'sacrifice' or 'a sense of achievement at overcoming some difficulties or problems'. One of the most common examples cited was that associated with waged employment, for the majority of interviewees had undertaken work that was unfulfilling and was the source of stress and anxiety. Many interviewees spoke of the glee they felt on Friday afternoons, leaving work knowing they had survived another week, had earned some money and the weekend lay ahead. Interestingly, interviewees that had experienced unemployment commented on these paradoxes of waged work and the way that good and bad experiences flow from it. Whilst at work these interviewees spoke of often wanting to have a life without waged work but then when they had experienced unemployment they realised that they did need the structure and friendships (as well as the income) that employment brings. Some spoke therefore of a love/hate relationship with their jobs. The virtues of hard work and commitment and the satisfaction that comes from them were ones that all of my interviewees recognised in their own lives in marked contrast to Furedi's

portrayal of increasing numbers of individuals seduced by a happiness rooted in immediate gratification.

We can see the operation of this more Eudaimonic form of happiness when interviewees were asked about looking backwards and forwards in time and how happiness featured through their biographies. Alex for example was a twenty two year old female student from a working class background studying social sciences in the North East of England.

Alex: You know we're talking about the definition of happiness? I think sometimes you can do things that don't make you happy, but when you look back... they've allowed you to be happy where you will be.... You're at Uni and you're thinking, [sighs] this and that - but in the long run it will help make your life happier... The fruit is always nice, but it's just the labouring isn't necessarily nice.

Here we witness the paradox of wellbeing in that the positive experiences we commonly associate with happiness often rely for their meaning and significance on negative events in our lives - the hardships that we all encounter as humans. Alex spoke of the difficulties of moving away from her family, struggling with little money to pay for her food, books and travel. At times during her degree she had considered dropping out but had persevered - in part because she had the belief that in the long run, qualifications would help her to secure a more satisfying career and a better and happier life. Here we begin to see how Furedi's pessimism about the nature of happiness today may be misplaced instead we need a far more complex appreciation of the diverse ways that happiness is experienced in everyday life. For happiness for ordinary people is an evaluative process whereby individuals weight up courses of action, informed by their values and interests and think through what is best for them. Furthermore this ethical conduct - of choosing between possible courses of action (the good/bad, ways to flourish) happens as we make decisions but then over time we also monitor, reflect and modify these choices too. It is an ongoing evaluative process that is a feature of everyday practical reasoning and how we come to develop commitments and attachments to people, places, life goals and projects. In Alex's case her strongly held religious beliefs provided a set of values that informed the reasoning and choices she made and hence her experiences of happiness. Christian theology had suggested to her that at times in her life she would have to work hard and make personal sacrifices if she wanted to achieve a more enduring happiness - an example of the continuing relevance of the deferred gratification often associated with the Protestant Work Ethic. The enduring nature of these older, traditional values and their important role in our wellbeing has been noted by others (Pahl, 1995) that raises questions about the nature and extent of the cultural shift towards narcissism and therapeutic sensibilities suggested by Furedi.

The biographical timelines I constructed during interviews generated other insights into lay accounts of happiness. A common feature was critical moments (Thomson et al., 2002) in life stories such as ill health, divorce and bereavement where identities and the things that people value are threatened. Colin for

example, a twenty five year old male from a working class background had suffered a serious head injury that had left him partially paralysed with a range of cognitive difficulties (processing information, reading and writing). The immediate aftermath of the accident was a miserable time – a year of hospital visits, relying on parents again for care and the loss of his job and girlfriend. Colin showed me photographs of the ‘Old Colin’, smiling in the gym, contrasting that with the ‘Colin today’, the one that walks slowly with the aid of a stick. The loss of the ‘Old Colin’ was a traumatic event full of frustration, anger, regret and shame. Yet 2 years after the accident he talked of feeling much more positively about his life now as he had made efforts to adapt to his new life – learning to drive again, seeing old friends and joining a support group. Such accounts illustrate that when asked about happiness people can provide banal, simple examples such as laughing and having fun but when prompted will also offer more subtle, deeply felt narratives. These accounts echo Sayers’ arguments about wellbeing as a practical accomplishment, where people ‘work at’ challenging situations in life and the difficult emotions that accompany them.

### Social Happiness: the collective dimensions of wellbeing?

A further difficulty with Furedi’s treatment of wellbeing is that it hinges on the decline in social virtues such as altruism and the growth in narcissism and a ‘turn inwards towards the self’. The contemporary growth in egocentrism for Furedi generates a view of happiness as something experienced through the self, notably our emotions and our bodies. This sensibility is promoted by pop psychology and corporations who have something to gain from creating insecure citizens who believe quick-fix, consumerist routes to happiness. Even when we do have relationships with others our engagements with them are narrowly focused on how others can satisfy our own needs and search for positive wellbeing. Furedi suggests these popular ideas about wellbeing rely on mistaken ideas about happiness – happiness again is a problem and deeply corrosive as Furedi tells us they help sustain damaging myths about the sources of wellbeing – that we can be happy consumer citizens in market economies by tending to the self rather than through our relationships with others – an ‘auto hedonia’ rather than ‘social hedonia’. Yet I suggest that these sorts of claims about the emergence of consumer culture, creating isolated inward looking individuals is far too dystopian and neglects the continuing significance of wellbeing rooted in social, caring relationships and traditional virtues of compassion, altruism and duty (Gilbert, 2005). A few minutes reflection on our own lives illustrates that caring for people and seeing the happiness we can create for others as well as receive ourselves are at the heart of much of what we do in life. The majority of the interview data I collected involved people discussing these important relationships in their lives and their significance for their wellbeing. This sort of ‘social happiness’ (Thin, 2012) we see operating with the case of James a fifty three year old senior manager who when asked about ‘being happy’ spoke about the challenges he had faced in recent years. After twenty-five years of marriage, successful career and parenting he is now divorced, living life as a single man. Further probing during several interviews, spanning eighteen months revealed a complex picture of happiness.

James: It's about five years ago my wife said that she didn't love me anymore, which was a real shock. And we've got four children. We didn't really agree anything but we just stayed together...It was just living together really for the sake of the children.

His wife's revelation was met at first by the desire to leave the family home but James spoke of weighing up his options, discussing with family and friends about how best to manage this situation of losing what he thought was a stable, domestic and personal life. The once supportive and loving relationship with his wife had become one marked by conflict, disagreement and emotional distance. James' children spoke of their desire to see their father remain in the family home, friends and relatives also spoke to him about the needs of his children and so over time James and his wife came to a form of settlement. This involved them staying together in the family home for a number of years, living amicably so that they could raise their children as best as they could, despite the end of their loving relationship. This for James illustrates the inherently social dimensions of happiness – how our actions in caring for and loving others are essential for their wellbeing and how we too can benefit through these altruistic, compassionate or dutiful acts. This illustrates the usefulness of thinking of happiness in terms of the classical views of Eudaimonia whereby wellbeing is the everyday effort we make to flourish and as such is a practical accomplishment. The case of James illustrates many of the dimensions of this more complex processual construction of wellbeing identified by Sayer (2011). There are powerful emotions triggered by vulnerabilities that then act as a catalyst for practical reasoning (that is often flawed as we are fallible) in order to manage and adapt to a situation that threatens ones flourishing. The practical reasoning mobilises resources, is informed by values and shapes the judgements (the ethical conduct) that James had to make as he navigated his way through this challenging time, working at his own personal wellbeing as well as those he cared for.

### **Sarah Ahmed and Happiness Discourses**

So far I have suggested that sociologists such as Furedi use, 'happiness as a problem' as a device to develop their own arguments about the 'dark side of modernity' akin to earlier, classical sociological studies. Yet this offers an inadequate empirical account of how happiness is actually experienced by people in their everyday lives – for happiness is far more social and processual than this, grounded in everyday practical reasoning. But if Furedi were to offer a more nuanced empirical account of happiness this would undermine his key theoretical argument about the way modernity creates more alienated, narcissistic social identities. Hence crude empirical depictions of happiness and foundational narratives in sociology about social problems are closely intertwined. This problematic representation of happiness is common in the social sciences –it is also used by the influential writer Sara Ahmed (2010). Though Ahmed draws on different theoretical traditions, she still represents happiness in empirically simplistic ways in order to advance her own arguments about the oppressive nature of modernity. Ahmed employs Foucault's work to understand happiness as a discourse where power relations work through language and practices to shape patterns of domination. She suggests that

discussion of happiness in families and in the media may seem innocuous, but popular images of a 'happy life' can symbolise linguistically what are socially acceptable identities and lifestyles – normalising marriage, children, heterosexuality, waged employment and so on. Ideas of happiness and notions of happy lives function here as powerful moral signifiers of right/wrong ways of living, in the process framing practices that marginalise minorities such as migrants, lesbians and gays caught on the 'wrong' side of these boundaries.

(H)appiness is used to justify oppression. Feminist critiques of the figure of 'the happy housewife', black critiques of the myth of 'the happy slave' and queer critiques of the sentimentalization of heterosexuality as 'domestic bliss' have taught me most about happiness and the very terms of its appeal. Around the specific critiques are long histories of scholarship and activism which expose the unhappy effects of happiness, teaching us how happiness is used to re-describe social norms as social goods. We might even say that such political movements have struggled *against* rather than *for* happiness. (Ahmed, 2010: 2, italics in the original)

The problem of happiness for Ahmed is that popular images such as the 'happy housewife' have a powerful currency as the happiness of these 'normal' women are a public affirmation of the 'rightness' of their way of life. Images of happiness offer subtle (and not so subtle) messages about how to work on the self and are drivers of self-governance and self-oppression. Many struggle to conform to these dominant ways of living and experience unhappiness and powerlessness as a result.

### 'Happiness in the round'

Ahmed like Furedi, does offer a persuasive account of how happiness functions in oppressive ways. Some of my interviewees did offer accounts of happiness working in this manner – parents for example constructing preferred visions of 'happy futures' for their adult children that featured the idealised bliss of heterosexual marriage. Yet at the same time all interviewees suggested that their sense of wellbeing emerged not just from one dominant area of their life but from many different domains and aspects of their identities. Hence a more creative engagement with wellbeing calls for a more holistic approach than we see in traditional sociological research and its various specialisms that focus on just one domain or theme such as sexualities, employment, education, health, and so on.

Furthermore the use of the 'problem of happiness' to promote a wider theoretical argument tends to produce a rather 'thin' account of wellbeing so that we feel distanced from the people's lives in these books. Hence Furedi and Ahmed despite the supposed interest in happiness, offer instead lengthy insights into the creation of misery and suffering today. There is little here about how our ordinary lives have positive as well as negative dimensions, how these are related, change over time and our daily efforts to make difficult choices, managing these changes. Again happiness as a social and personal problem has crowded out a more rounded, temporal understanding people's lives and their

wellbeing. We get a sense of the necessity of offering a more holistic approach to happiness when we view the case of Sally, a thirty year old middle class graduate. This case illustrates a common trend across the data where interviewees were anxious about the freedom to establish long-term intimate relationships as Ahmed might suggest yet also featured other dimensions of their lives that were significant for wellbeing. Space precludes detailed discussion but the happiness mapping we undertook suggested that Sally's job working with teenagers for an educational charity was very rewarding, she also had a wide circle of friends and good relationships with her siblings – all of which she claimed helped her to have overall a positive evaluation of her wellbeing. Positive events in one domain can help compensate for problems in another.

### 'Managing happiness'

Ahmed's account of happiness as discourse constructs actors as caught in powerful webs of language/practices that offer little insight into resistance and coping strategies. Yet qualitative research can illustrate the many different ways that people creatively manage their lives as they navigate constraints and conflicts in an effort to flourish. We witness this with Louise's accounts of meeting her girlfriend's father for the first time and his prejudices about gay couples. Despite the powerful way that happiness becomes embroiled with the shaming of these young women they do try to neutralise the effects of his behaviour.

Louise: We did have a 'do' about it and he just got up and left... He did speak to me (to make up) but he didn't apologise, but I didn't either, we put it behind us... In a way he is homophobic... I was quite open minded with him initially but I don't say much to him now but I do get on with my girlfriend's mum.

Louise has learnt that at times it is best to, 'agree to disagree' with some people, at times 'self-censor' and 'just move on'. In this case making practical steps to avoid her girlfriend's father and spend more time with her girlfriend's mother was a way of managing the corrosive effects of seeing the father.

Interviewees also spoke of how they came to challenge the internalised operation of dominant conceptions of happiness – the self-disciplining that is a characteristic of Foucauldian conception of happiness scripts. During her early years Sally for example had adopted her parent's conceptions of, 'a good life' - married bliss, a good career and comfortable home, all by the age of thirty. Yet, slowly since leaving home for university Sally had come to question these earlier conceptions of happiness, developing her own independent ideas about her wellbeing. Sally has performed a mental distancing between her earlier conceptions of happiness and more recent adult ones. She wanted more time and freedom to live her own life. Interviews with Sally were marked by descriptions of the dissonance between different ways of thinking about happiness and the unsettling internal dialogue that characterised her efforts to live an independent life.

Sally: It is difficult for me because I always used to go to my mum and dad for advice and I have learnt that I don't do that anymore because I can't take on what they have got to say to me...That upsets me, if they say something (about my boyfriend) then I get really confused...I've had to like, build a little bit of a fortress around myself... I don't like other people making judgments on how happy I am, ...I don't really have a conversation with them anymore, I have more of a kind of fight.

The development of one's own happiness scripts in competition with our earlier notions of happiness can be troubling, particularly if these earlier scripts are reinforced by ongoing encounters with those (such as parents) who framed these ideas. Hence Sally's creative reflexivity was supported by friends and other family members who counselled her on how best to develop her own views on a happy life and how best to 'manage her parents'. Thus over time Sally learnt to 'self censor' and monitor what she said about her views on happiness to her parents.

In these examples happiness scripts can be a way to exercise power and subject others to forms of control both internally and externally. But my data also suggests other ways in which happiness is experienced that are neglected in Ahmed's account. The young people contest their parent's social and psychological dominance by using their creativity and resources to mitigate the corrosive effects of happiness scripts. Although happiness in these various discursive forms may appear to be problematic and oppressive it is also struggled over, emerging out of everyday forms of practical reasoning in various domains of life. Sally and Louise were insistent and pursued their own versions of happiness that demonstrated to others that happiness can also be associated with ways of living that they themselves had chosen in their own way and in their own time.

## **Conclusions**

This paper examines the peculiar neglect of happiness by mainstream British sociology. The paucity of research into happiness seems surprising, given the long history of happiness studies and its recent resurgence in economics and psychology. Influential writers such as Ahmed and Furedi present happiness as a problem neglecting the myriad ways that it is actually experienced empirically by ordinary people. Though there is a history of sociological research usually involving surveys into life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing there is a need for a much more ambitious theoretical and methodological engagement with the multiplicity of ways that happiness features in our lives. Granted, happiness was understood simplistically as subjective good feeling by my respondents but happiness was also viewed as the balance of good and bad experiences in everyday life. Interviewees reflected on their past lives, making judgements about the quality of their life and musing on notions of what constitutes a good life. Happiness operates as a process of everyday accomplishment whereby individuals employ practical reasoning in their daily lives. Such a conception may appear as inward looking but these reflections on, and experiences of happiness were also rooted in the social relationships and reciprocal acts of compassion,



altruism and duty. Happiness was very much a part of biographical projects and reflected the tensions and conflicts between actors' values and pursuit of their interests in the face of wider social constraints and regulation. These data illustrate the continuing relevance of classic writings and understandings of happiness that together offer us insights into how we can develop a more ambitious project of empirical research into happiness. This social happiness as flourishing is in marked contrast with the simplistic way that lay accounts of happiness as, 'subjective good feeling', is often depicted by sceptical sociologists.

The lasting influence of foundational thinkers I suggest accounts for the neglect of happiness research by modern British sociologists. Marx and Durkheim viewed happiness as problematic as it was an expression of the individualising processes in Western modernity. For them a focus on happiness was to view life through a distorted lens that obscured more fundamental social processes that shaped societies and life chances. Happiness therefore has come to be seen simplistically and as problematic as unfortunately it has been woven into the grand narratives that anchor sociology. Hence it is not just the theoretical legacy of early sociologists that account for current scepticism about happiness research but also the way that happiness is often used as a vehicle for other arguments about the dark side of modernity. Hence to promote a greater sociological understanding of happiness we do need to disentangle the complex ways happiness is experienced in everyday life from the ways that happiness is deployed and often (mis)represented by many sociologists.

## Notes

1. This is particularly so in the UK, in contrast to European sociology, see Veenhoven (1984). Though see Bartram (2012).
2. Abbot and Wallace (2012) have recently examined how best to measure wellbeing in a more complex way drawing on the work of Bourdieu.
3. Weber and Simmel both write about happiness but space precludes discussion here.
4. Adam Smith in, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2009) offered a more 'social' rather than individualised conception of wellbeing.
5. Though acknowledging the ancient interest in happiness as process Sayer prefers to use the term flourishing as happiness for him conveys a more static, personal thing.

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