

## **The Pursuit of Happiness**

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**We spend our lives searching for it, yet frequently overlook the real source of it. Dr Nattavudh Powdthavee questions why we repeatedly fail to predict what will make us happy.**

Happiness; we all want it. As one of the most important issues in our lives, if not the most important, the pursuit of happiness influences almost everything we do and every decision we make. It is the primary reason behind our decision to get married, have children, change jobs, buy a lottery ticket or purchase an expensive car. It probably also explains why most of us choose to sacrifice quality time with our loved ones in order to stay a little longer in the office so that, when the time comes, we can reap the fruits of our misery today.

Yet why is it that as soon as we get there, when the time actually comes, we often end up saying to ourselves "I thought the future was going to feel a lot better than this?" Conversely, why is it that we think that any emotional pain we are suffering now will still be present ten years from now, when in fact it often dissipates within a matter of a year or two? What explains the reason we repeatedly fail to predict what will make us truly happy in the future? These seem like very important questions, but also extremely tricky to answer. Has social science a clue?

### **Happiness research**

Whilst psychologists have been studying what makes us happy for years, the subject has only recently been picked up by social scientists in other disciplines such as economics and sociology. At the heart of happiness research lies what psychologists refer to as "happiness data". For example, the British Household Panel Surveys in the UK has asked individuals every year since 1997 to evaluate their overall satisfaction with life on a 7-point scale, with the lowest value (1) denoting "very dissatisfied with life" and the highest value (7) "very satisfied with life". While there are limitations to such statistics, social scientists have come round to the idea that, if the aim is to learn about what makes people tick, listening to what they say seems an obvious first step to take.

In fact further studies have show happiness data to have consistent correlations with alternative sources of information on this matter. So, for example, the family and friends of an individual who rates themselves as "very satisfied with life" will agree that this person is very happy. It is also more likely that such an individual will record a healthy heart rate and blood pressure, and may even live longer than someone who regards themselves as less content with life.

### **Money and happiness**

One of the most interesting and surprising findings in the happiness research concerns the relationship between how much we earn and how happy we feel. Dr Richard Easterlin, a professor of economics at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, found that global judgements of life satisfaction, or happiness, have not changed over the last four decades, despite large increases in income per capita. One

explanation for this is that people tend to judge themselves largely by their position relative to other people. **Someone with an income of \$32,000 in a society where the median is \$40,000 may feel as socially disadvantaged as someone with an income of \$8,000 in a society where the median is \$10,000; so even quadrupling people's real income may not make much difference in how they feel if it does not improve their ranking in the income hierarchy.** The so-called Easterlin paradox contradicts the modern and basic economic assumption of *more is always better than less* with regards to the role of money on happiness.

Not only does this finding disagree with what can only be regarded as the central tenet in the study of economics, it also opposes many people's view on the importance of money to their happiness. When asked how important money is to their lives, most people on the streets rate it to be quite high up in the ranking of things that make them happy. Yet studies in the economics of happiness reveal time and time again that money buys very little happiness. What matters more to our happiness, it appears, are the things that we often overlook in our daily lives such as health, family and friends.

But what explains the reason behind our ignorance over what makes us truly happy? Why is it that we still choose to eat fatty food, work long hours and spend endless time commuting to and from work, when research repeatedly shows that all of these activities are detrimental to our well-being, short-term and long-term? Why do we still overestimate the importance of – as the above example suggests – money to our overall psychological well-being? Do we not know what makes us happy? Can we not learn from our past experiences?

### **Affective forecasting**

You might find it comfortable to hear that it is not entirely our fault. All of us are, to various degrees, prone to biases that cast a shadow upon our ability to predict our future experiences accurately. Dr. Daniel Gilbert, a professor of social psychology at Harvard University, called this inability the problem of *affective forecasting*.

For example, one important reason for why we tend to exaggerate the role of income on our well-being is because we associate money with more time spent in leisurely pursuits such as watching a large-screen plasma TV or playing golf. However, as reality would have it, we should have been considering the more likely scenario – that we'll be spending a lot more time working and commuting and a lot less time engaged in passive leisure (and playing golf).

**Dr.** Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel laureate in economics and a professor of psychology from Princeton University, and his colleagues revealed that as income rises, people's time use does not appear to shift towards activities that are associated with improved happiness. Instead, people actually devote relatively more time to work and commuting, compulsory non-work activities (such as shopping and child care), and active leisure (such as exercise). They spend significantly less time on passive leisure (such as watching television). As a result they experience no greater happiness, yet their levels of tension and stress actually increase slightly. All of which adds weight to the idea that a higher income does not necessarily lead to greater happiness.

**Dr.** Kahneman also found that while people tend to think richer people spend significantly less time in bad moods compared to people of lower incomes, the reality

is a completely different story. The prevalence of a bad mood predicted for people with lower incomes compared to the actual time spent in a bad mood was grossly overestimated by the majority of people who took part in the survey. In other words, most of us believe that people with undesirable life circumstances (i.e. lack of income) must be suffering a lot more from hardship than what they actually experience in their daily lives.

Such false intuitions probably arise from a failure to recognise that people do not continuously think about their circumstances, whether positive or negative. Individuals who have recently experienced significant life changes (for example getting married, becoming disabled, or winning the lottery) surely think of their new circumstances many times each day. However, the allocation of attention eventually changes, so that they spend most of their time attending to and drawing pleasure or displeasure from other daily activities such as having breakfast or watching television. They are only reminded of their economic status when prompted, for example a survey, to rate how important income is to their happiness.

### **So how does this apply to Thai people?**

You might find it surprising, but we are not actually that different at predicting happiness than the rest of the world. However, we are considerably luckier than most for at least two reasons. First, Buddhist teaching seems to link directly to the findings of happiness research. The notion *small is beautiful* – like the saying that a small bird only needs to make a nest that fits – is scientifically proven to be key for achieving true and lasting happiness. Secondly, we are extremely lucky to have a king who realises the importance of such teaching on his people's overall well-being. This great institution, one which many countries around the world lacks, helps to reinforce the idea of moderation in not only our way of life, but also future government plans. The latter effect of his inspiration is reflected in the recent conference on happiness and public policy organised by the Public Policy Development Office (PPDO), a new unit in the government house. The international conference gathered a group of well-known psychologists, economists and other academics in the field such as Professor Robert Cummins and Professor Paul Frijters from Australia, as well as government officials from Thailand as well as the Kingdom of Bhutan, for a two-day discussion with an aim to include the findings from happiness research and the idea of sufficiency economy into the design of future public policies.

How effective we could apply the above two factors on our own quest for happiness, however, is entirely up to us. For instance, have a think to yourself before making any decision “Am I focusing too much on just one aspect of things? Have I thought about other important aspects that will matter to me later in the future or just the things that I think will matter to me now?” If we can learn from the Buddha's teaching as well as from the happiness research findings, then it may be possible to map out the things we need to do (or not do) in order to make our future-self as happy as we know he or she deserves to be.

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(my website is [www.powdthavee.co.uk](http://www.powdthavee.co.uk)) – not sure you want to include that in.