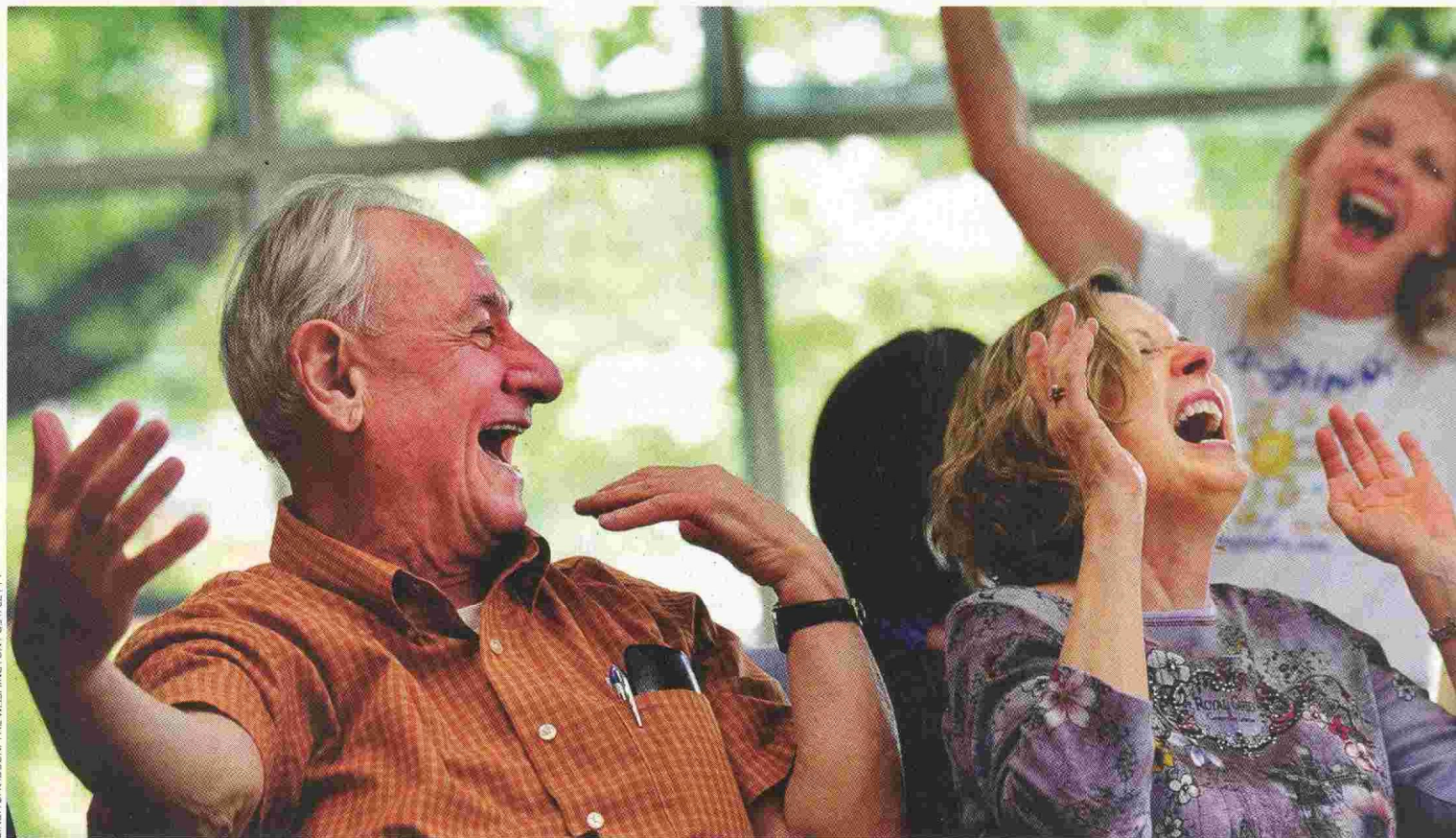


The happiness agenda



LINDA DAVIDSON/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

April 2011 is set to be not the cruellest month but the happiest, when the UK becomes the first nation in the world to officially record the happiness of its citizens. With the notion of happiness coming under scrutiny from psychologists and neuroscientists, **Liz Else** introduces our special investigation of what happiness is, and what it means for individuals and society as it collides with politics

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NEXT week, 200,000 questionnaires will be going out to homes across the UK from the Office for National Statistics.

They will include four simple questions: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

This will be a world first. Other nations collect some happiness data – especially the US through its Gallup polls – and France has plans to collect similar information. But the UK is taking nationwide studies to a new level, “like going from a land-based telescope to Hubble”, according to David Halpern, director of the Behavioural Insight Team within the Cabinet Office. So what does the government hope to make of the answers? Halpern believes that the data will enable citizens to make better life decisions and help win support for wiser social policies.



or anyone's big idea. Let it into politics, and it may bring some uncomfortable insights.

Research into happiness and well-being is progressing fast. It is following two broad approaches, only one of which is fully recognised in the new happiness survey. But both approaches challenge the traditional views of ourselves and may change politics forever. Equally important is the second approach, focusing on inequality and its impact on health, crime and a host of other social indicators.

In the pages that follow, we hear from Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, who uncovers some surprising errors in our assessments of what will make us happy (page 48). Economist Richard Layard, author



JOSE SEVIA GOLLONERA/CORBIS

"Having let the genie out, politicians must expect science to pose ever harder, clearer questions"

At the personal level, happiness data can challenge common preconceptions. It can reveal the best places to live, whether a long daily commute will truly be a price worth paying for the benefits of living in the suburbs, whether living next to a wind farm causes any long-term distress, and many more.

Closer to social policy, happiness data might shed light on the impact of unemployment on people's well-being, and what that might mean for those deciding whether to take up low-paid work that barely offsets the loss of unemployment-benefit payments. And it will put to the test the intuition often voiced by the UK prime minister, David Cameron, of the value of caring and compassion and its consequences in considerateness for people, neighbourliness and volunteering.

Such intuitions might, of course, turn out to be wrong, or only a small part of a much bigger story. Science has a habit of burrowing its way to the truth, not hewing to a party line

of *Happiness*, explains why he is fronting the Action for Happiness project (page 49). Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, authors of the controversial book *The Spirit Level*, focus on the effects of inequality (page 50). And the French writer and philosopher Pascal Bruckner takes issue with the whole notion that happiness is something we should care about in the way we do (page 51).

So what happens when we put these growing sciences together? First, we have to recognise that while money isn't everything, wealth remains very important to happiness. Studies by the Nobel prizewinning economist Daniel Kahneman show that day-to-day emotional well-being rises with annual income up to \$75,000 (£46,000), a level enjoyed by only the top 20 per cent of UK society. A separate measure, called "life evaluation", which records what people think about their own lives, goes on rising with higher income, at least up until the survey's

limit of \$115,000 (£70,000). This work lays bare the fact that there is more than one way to think about "happiness", and no certainty about how best to measure it.

It also highlights a common but crucial misconception: that beyond a certain level money is not important. A more accurate view is the not especially surprising finding that a given amount of money matters less as your income grows: a £1000 rise will mean a lot if you earn £10,000, but relatively little if you earn £100,000. However, if the relative value of money is taken into account by plotting the relation between, say, national happiness and GDP on a logarithmic scale rather a linear one, happiness goes on rising steadily with wealth.

The effect of inequality seems likely to present governments intent on raising their nation's happiness index with an uncomfortable truth. As Wilkinson and Pickett explain, the bigger the gap between rich and poor in a society, the worse it fares on such key indicators as life expectancy, general health, and levels of crime, violence and mental illness.

The science of inequality originated in international health and economic statistics, but has long since acquired a broader base in physiological and biochemical studies. Some of the strongest evidence available tells us that the stress suffered by people lower down the social hierarchy not only shortens lives but brings about (possibly irreversible) changes in the hippocampus, damaging the ability to learn, remember and develop. Such studies fit well with those of happiness researchers like Kahneman, who has shown that "low income exacerbates the emotional pain associated with such misfortunes as divorce, ill health and being alone".

The entry of these new sciences is going to be challenging. While they will teach us ways in which we might more skilfully manage our individual happiness, they will also point out social problems in a starker way than politicians may like.

That said, it shouldn't be forgotten that while science can analyse problems, it cannot dictate solutions. As Wilkinson and Pickett point out, there are many roads to a fairer society, from policies that redistribute income to those that focus on providing equal opportunity to get to the top. Which one to follow is a political choice, not primarily a scientific one. Having allowed the genie of happiness science out of the bottle, politicians can expect it to pose them ever harder and clearer questions. That has to be a welcome development. ■