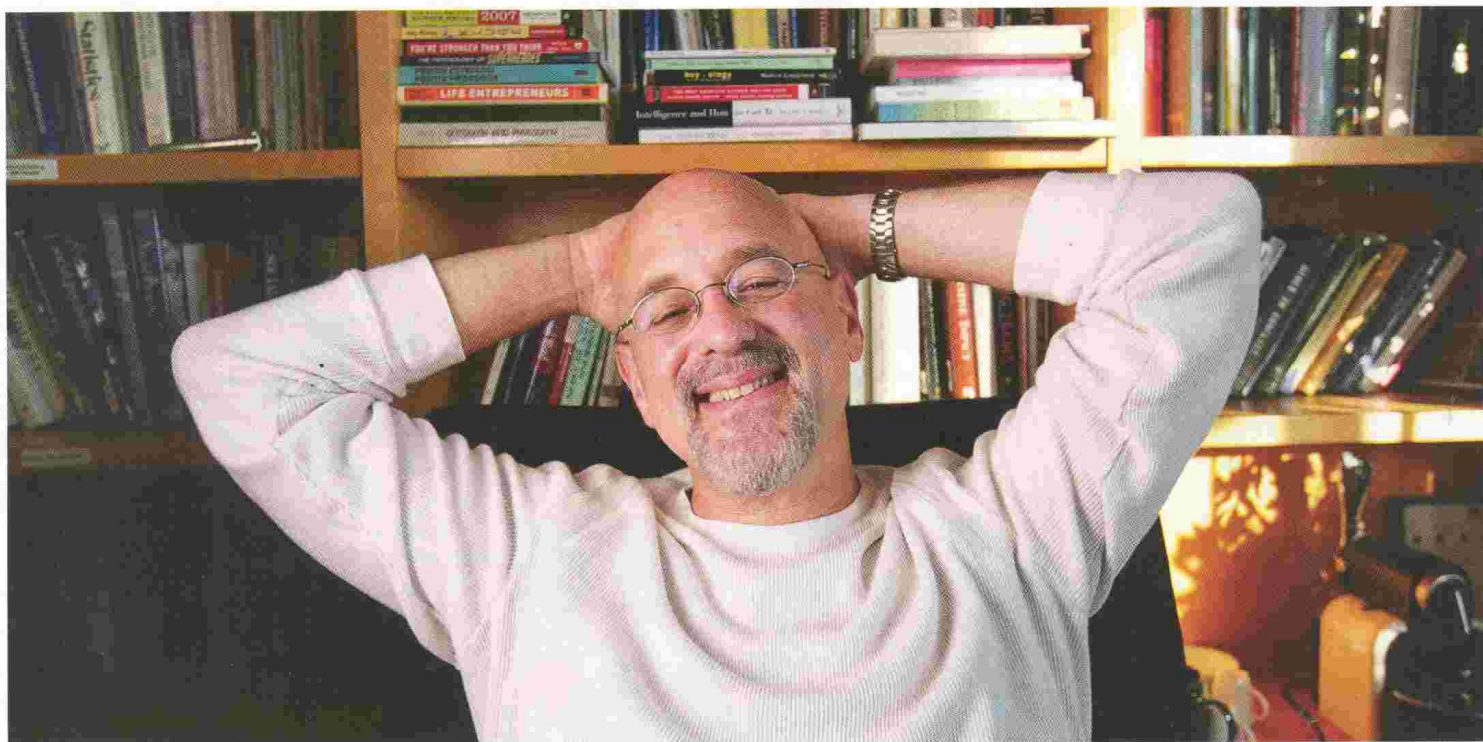


Daniel Gilbert sometimes acts on his own happiness research, like when he proposed to his girlfriend



In pursuit of happiness

What on earth do we mean by "happiness"? Jessica Griggs talks to Daniel Gilbert, who is trying to nail it by charting the ups and downs of 5000 lives worldwide

What's so tough about studying happiness?

One problem is that researchers often measure different things and then talk about them as though they were interchangeable measures of the same thing. We can measure how happy someone is in the moment or how satisfied they are with their lives, and while both are interesting, they are not the same. For instance, we now know that once you earn about \$75,000 per year, your happiness won't increase with more income but your satisfaction will. So the public policies that will lead citizens to say "I'm satisfied" are not necessarily the same as those that will lead them to say "I'm happy," and so when we make policy we must first decide which of these we want to maximise.

Can we trust what people say about happiness?

There is a widespread belief that it is "objective" to measure muscle contractions and cerebral blood flow but "subjective" to measure happiness by asking people how they feel. That's rubbish. People's reports of their emotions are incredibly reliable and they wouldn't correlate with all the other indicators of emotion if they weren't. The issue isn't what you ask, but when. Asking people to report how they felt yesterday when watching TV is not particularly useful because retrospective reports are notoriously biased. Ideally, you want to ask this question when people are in the middle of watching TV. Unfortunately, until recently, collecting data this way has been wildly impractical.

How have you tackled this timing issue?

Trackyourhappiness.org is a research project that uses smartphones to solve the problem. We send volunteers text messages asking them to report how they are feeling and what they are doing at that very minute.

Over 5000 people from 83 countries have signed up. Are there any surprises in the data?

Yes. For example, most of us think that it is fun to let our minds wander (which happens about half the time). But our data show that when the mind is wandering, people are less happy, not more. People are happiest when thinking about what they are doing and not something else. This is true even when commuting or washing up.

Why? Surely happy thoughts make us happier.

I always thought so, and so did everyone I know, but we were wrong. People who are "here and now" seem happier than those who aren't. That's one reason social interaction makes people happy. When you talk to someone, your mind rarely wanders because you are listening and thinking about what to say. Interaction keeps us tethered to the moment. It doesn't allow us to float away.

What else makes us happy?

There aren't many surprises. As your grandma might have said, the list includes friendships, health, money, sleep and sex. To my mind, the

only real surprise is children, who have a small but reliably negative impact on happiness.

Is it useful to measure national happiness?

I don't think it is important to come up with a single number – the equivalent of a gross national product index. What we really want to know is whether and why Liverpudlians are happier than Mancunians, whether and why people in this job are happier than in that one. Public policy has always sought to maximise the well-being of citizens, and the reason so much policy is meant to promote economic growth is because we believe it enhances well-being. Now we can measure well-being directly and put such assumptions to the test.

Will austerity bring new ways to be happy?

When people have less wealth than they had, they feel miserable. So people who were doing fine are going to experience pain. But the greatest pain will be felt by those who aren't doing fine – namely, the middle class and the poor. People have basic needs, and when those needs aren't met they feel unhappy. New ways of seeing things won't fill their stomachs.

Should states push to measure happiness?

Of course. If your salary were suddenly halved you would want to know which of your current expenditures contribute to your well-being and which don't. Similarly, we need to know which areas of state spending give us the biggest bang for our buck.

Does your research make you change your life?

I believe my data and I incorporate the lessons into my life when I can. A few years ago, we

“The only real surprise is children, who have a small but reliably negative impact on happiness”

found that people are much happier with irreversible than reversible decisions because we rationalise the former but not the latter. Someone mentioned this was the essential difference between living with or marrying your girlfriend. If your wife does something mildly annoying you shrug your shoulders, but when your girlfriend does it you wonder if you should keep shopping. As soon as I saw that result I went home and proposed. ■

Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard University, wrote *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006)

Time for action

Do we really need a global project called Action for Happiness? One of its main architects, Richard Layard, explains his thinking

The Action for Happiness project is based on two simple ideas: if we want a happier society, we must make it an explicit objective of how we live; and the science of happiness now gives us the tools for the job.

The sad fact revealed by surveys is that despite big increases in income, UK and US citizens are no happier now than in the 1950s. The reasons are fairly clear. While people care about their income, they value more how income relates to the prevailing norm. But since it is impossible for a society to improve relative income, long-term economic growth is not a feasible route to a happier society.

Moreover, if we want to explain the variation of happiness, income is not the main driver. For that we need to look at the quality of people's relationships and their mental health. Compared with the past, people are less happy with their marriages and, in most countries, job satisfaction has fallen. There has also been a collapse of trust in the UK and the US. In the 1960s, around 60 per cent considered that “most other people can be trusted”; now it is around 30 per cent.

Health problems

Mental health is, if anything, worse today than in the 1960s. For young people in the UK it has certainly deteriorated: twice as many adolescents have emotional or behavioural problems as in the 1970s, with similar trends seen in students in the US and Australia.

The good news is there is much we can do about the bad news. Science used to be about control of nature, but in recent decades, social science, psychology and neurology have given us a new ability to manage our inner selves and social structures so as to increase happiness.

So is there a conflict between

making others happy and becoming happier yourself? Sometimes. But we have evidence that people who care more about others are happier than more selfish people. And brain-scanning studies show that someone cooperating in a prisoner's dilemma game (a problem that shows why two people might not cooperate even if it helps both to do so) has the same electrical activity in the brain's reward centre as when they have any other rewarding experience.

This provides huge ground for hope, because efforts to produce better behaviour are doomed if they are joyless. Aristotle understood this when he said that virtue has to be developed as a habit, so “virtuous actions in themselves give pleasure”. Of course, there is a deeply selfish side to our nature, but it is the job of culture to support our natural altruism against our natural egotism.

Action for Happiness asks people to commit to increasing happiness and to decreasing misery – and equips them with the tools to do so. Our website offers 10 evidence-based keys to happier living, and 50 actions – ranging from private strategies, such as meditation, to better ways of child-rearing, to happier workplaces, and lobbying for well-being policies.

What is truly new here is that this is a secular movement for radical cultural change. There is a clear hunger: before launch we had over 4000 members from 60 countries, including scientists such as Robert May and Colin Blakemore. We appeal to everybody who feels that, based on evidence rather than assertion, the things we hold dear must not be sacrificed to the god of growth. ■

Richard Layard is programme director of well-being at the London School of Economics, and is a Labour life peer