

# Happiness research draws our attention to both structure and agency

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*Happiness research draws our attention to how the structure of society impacts upon our wellbeing just as much as it does to individual behaviours and characteristics, writes [Paul Dolan](#). Being happier, therefore, involves both structure and agency.*



Research into happiness has increased in recent years and we know a lot more than we once did about its determinants. Researchers have typically highlighted differences across people relating to their age, gender, income, marital status, employment status and health. One of the charges levelled at this research is its implicit emphasis on what individuals can change about themselves to be happier rather than on how society can be structured differently to improve people's wellbeing. The measurement of happiness by the Office for National Statistics in the UK has been [seen by some](#) as a smokescreen for cuts in public services, which could be justified if we were doing a good enough job of making ourselves happy without them.

A proper reading of the literature does not lead to this conclusion. Happiness research helps us to discover what matters most in people's lives so that we can prioritise society's resources to address the biggest problems. The research draws our attention to how the structure of society impacts upon our wellbeing just as much as it does to individual behaviours and characteristics. Instead of erasing difficult questions, such as those about poverty, inequality, or population health, the research sharpens our answers to them. It shows us how much these questions matter – and they matter a lot.

There is [strong evidence](#), using a range of happiness measures, worldwide surveys, and diverse methodologies, to show that people who are poor are more miserable than people who are not. And they do not, as some have suggested, get used to their circumstances: poverty [starts bad and stays bad](#). Caring about happiness means we care about people who are poor. Moreover, in general, rising income inequality also [acts as a barrier](#) to achieving greater happiness. People from the [US and the UK](#) are happier during periods of low income inequality, as are people in [Japan](#), [urban China](#), and [Latin America](#). There are, however, some exceptions though: in [rural China](#), for example, greater inequality has been associated with greater wellbeing. This suggests that income inequality may sometimes serve as a signal of opportunity, depending on how fair the opportunities to earn more are perceived to be.

Bad health is bad for happiness, too. Using happiness data, [I have been able to show](#) just how much various bad health conditions matter to how we feel and think about our lives. Using traditional methods of economic evaluation, which ask people how many years of life they are willing to give up not to have a health problem, people consider having moderate anxiety or depression to be about as bad as having some problems walking about. Happiness data turns this finding on its head, revealing that having anxiety or depression is about ten times as bad as having some problems walking about. There are a number of reasons for this, but the bottom line is that having anxiety or depression is usually more attention-seeking than having problems walking about. Caring about happiness means that we care about people's health, especially their mental health.

Being happier involves both structure and agency. Much of my academic life has been spent talking to policymakers about how they can use resources more wisely to improve people's wellbeing. In my recent book, [Happiness by Design](#), I focus on what individuals can do for themselves to become happier. I show how happiness contains feelings of pleasure on the one hand and purpose on the other. My experience is that those working hard at improving society feel that what they are doing is worthwhile – and that these good feelings of purpose sit alongside the bad feelings of stress and anger they also feel. We, as individuals, can focus on creating happy lives for

ourselves and others, and we can also work towards creating happier societies by paying serious attention to what really matters in people's lives.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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