

Towards a Developmental Understanding of Happiness

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Abstract

In this paper we centrally explore the ‘sociogenesis’ of the concept of happiness: the social processes by which it came to be a term appropriated by different practitioner communities – from policy makers to academics, from a burgeoning self-help industry to advocates of positive psychology. Our core focus is upon shifting historical understandings of the term and how these relate to more general social processes. Our aim in this paper is not to present a definitive history of ideas about happiness, but rather something of the overall direction of changes in dominant approaches to, and understandings of, happiness particularly within what we might broadly term ‘the human sciences’. Ultimately, we offer a series of tentative reflections upon the implications of a developmental approach to happiness as both a concept and a phenomenon for sociological analyses of this increasingly popular area of concern.

Keywords: happiness, sociogenesis, sociology of happiness, positivity, history of happiness, selfhood

Introduction

The study of happiness within the social sciences, despite considerable expansion over the last two decades, is still an ‘immature science’ (to the extent that we might accurately call it this)¹ in the sense of Thomas Kuhn’s use of the term. In his 1962 classic, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn suggests that immature science represents the first of three phases in the formation of a scientific discipline. Happiness studies are considered to be ‘immature’ in as much as they lack any definite consensus over key terminology and frames of reference, and have not yet acquired a unifying ‘paradigm’ (Bauman 2008; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Diener and Suh 1997; Carr 2004). Accordingly, we can understand ‘happiness studies’ as situated within the pre-paradigmatic phase of Kuhn’s typology. This lack of widespread consensus over key concepts and orientation to the field is in part the consequence of the multi- as well as inter-disciplinary character of the study of happiness – that it can be approached from multiple perspectives (i.e. psychology, economics, philosophy, political sciences, sociology or other social sciences). Characteristically, even though these different disciplines do not represent correspondingly competing schools of thought, they nonetheless each propose distinctive theories, methodologies and research processes, leaving therefore little room for crossovers, collective development and common enterprise. Within individual disciplines (e.g. within the sociological study of happiness), however, consensus is gradually becoming built, thus permitting the authors of bodies of literature to agree on certain commonalities in approach to the topic (see, for example, Veenhoven 2007; Veenhoven 2009; Bartram 2012; Abbott and Wallace 2012).

Among the many difficulties encountered when studying happiness sociologically, perhaps the most significant pertains to the near impossibility of defining the object of study: namely the concept of happiness. Happiness definitions are manifold, often revealing more about the epistemic and social dynamics of their inception than the character of that to which they pertain. Indeed, debates about how one might (or might not) classify the concept have arguably come to dominate the field (see, for

example, Seligman 2002, Seligman 2011, and Csikszentmihalyi 1990 relating to positive psychology; Diener et al. 1995, Lu & Gilmour 2004 and Suh & Oishi 2004 in cross-cultural psychology; Veenhoven 2006 in sociology; and Thin 2005 for anthropological definitions). Typically, when producing definitional accounts of happiness, there is a tendency for authors discursively to self-position in relation to a range of dominant discourses. It is in so doing that a shared sense of what happiness 'is' can be developed – whether 'it' is seen, for instance, as a volatile emotion like euphoria, a rational construct like self-esteem, or some finely articulated amalgam of the two. However, herein resides a kind of axiomatic error: the search for an eternal, unchanging, all-encompassing definition of happiness involves the epistemological fallacy that happiness 'has' a kind of essence that can be rendered conceptually. Even the most carefully crafted definitions have a tendency to capture everything and therefore nothing about happiness, and, perhaps more importantly, to direct our attention away from how various definitions, concepts, and approaches to happiness came to develop as they did.

Accordingly, our approach here departs from a preoccupation with 'classification' and involves, instead, more of a focus on tracing the *sociogenesis* (Elias 2012) – the social, epistemic/cultural emergence – of 'happiness' both as a normative concept and as a purported technical 'scientific' construct. In this respect, we have adopted aspects of Norbert Elias's 'figurational' approach to social analysis (see Elias 2006; 2012). Briefly, this approach involves apprehending and approaching social reality in a fundamentally processual and relational manner, where substantialism is avoided, and the primary engagement is with how the stuff of the social world *comes to be* (for a fuller discussion of such aspects of Elias's approach, see Dunning and Hughes 2013; Hughes and Goodwin 2014). Such an orientation underpins our conscious avoidance of the definitional quest fully to capture 'happiness', and indeed our rejection of the reification of happiness as a 'thing' that awaits full and proper 'discovery'. As we have applied this approach here, our investigation has involved a diachronic analysis of shifting historical understandings of happiness as they are expressed through the thought and writing of key historical figures and in various

cultural artefacts. Sociogenesis thus refers simultaneously to the development of particular understandings, distinctions, ways of seeing, saying, doing and to the concomitant development of the particular social conditions under which these take form. Thus, when we examine the ideas and writings of, for example, key philosophers of happiness our aim is to present these as part and parcel of broader social developments, rather than as in and of themselves the sole motor of epistemic and cultural change.

Below we explore at a broad-brush level a number of key shifts in historical understandings of happiness together with a range of interrelated social developments. We tentatively offer a brief overview of some of the principal trajectories of development involved in the formation of contemporary associations with the term, but by no means wish to present ours as a definitive or final account. We do so through examining some of (what are now considered to be) the seminal statements, key formulations, and other kinds of exemplar concerning the concept of happiness by individuals positioned at discrete historical and cultural junctures. As Darrin McMahon, a prominent historian of happiness, astutely observes, ‘there are infinite histories of happiness to be written’ – ‘of early-modern women and late-modern aristocrats, nineteenth-century bourgeois and twentieth-century workers, conservatives and radicals, consumers and crusaders, immigrants and natives, gentiles and Jews’ (McMahon 2006: xiii). McMahon is, in our view, right to highlight the folly of attempting to present *the* history of happiness, and the necessity of recognising the panoply of competing histories involved in the development of the term. However, in addition to our recognition of the competing versions and variants of such accounts of the concept, we are also sensitive to what has been ‘unsaid’ as well as said: of absences and discontinuities in particular discursive trajectories. For example, Sara Ahmed in her polemical *Promise of Happiness* (2010) adopts a ‘sceptical disbelief in happiness as a technique for living well’ (2010: 2), and accordingly focuses upon variant hermeneutic associations with the term, instead of supposedly concrete, fixed and unequivocal ‘meanings’. Such a position involves from the outset a recognition of the highly contested character of the term,

and of the politics involved in what is included as well as excluded in accounts of the representative history of happiness. For instance, Ahmed challenges the received intellectual history of the term – the history of happiness as an idea – by considering who or what is stylistically erased. Her analysis focuses upon how, for example, women are portrayed or do not even appear in McMahon's version of history. Drawing on Hegel's premise in the *Philosophy of History*, Ahmed suggests that periods of happiness are 'the empty pages of history' – 'times when the antithesis is missing'. She implies that, in essence, all human history is contingent on unhappiness and negation. Conversely, unhappiness continues to be the 'unthought in much philosophical literature, as well as in happiness studies' (2010: 17). Thus, Ahmed aims to develop a history of unhappiness, drawing on, among others, feminist, black and queer critiques, associating the desirability of happiness with marginalised groups from antiquity to modernity.

Below we will review a series of key historical statements on happiness, focusing principally on a period from the Enlightenment to late modernity. This period, we shall suggest, is specifically formative in the development of contemporary Western understandings of happiness. Our focus here is predominantly upon the trajectory of understandings in the US and, to a lesser extent, the UK. Elsewhere (see Jugureanu and Hughes 2010) we have explored other historical cases as part of an analysis of the cultural contingency of lay understandings of happiness. The examples given below are drawn principally from the historical accounts of happiness provided, in particular, in the work of McMahon (2006), and also Ahmed (2010) and Stearns (2012), among other material from a range of primary and secondary sources. Our central focus upon McMahon – including his selection of historical data – is expressly intended to form part of our attempt to re-cast 'the history of happiness as an idea' as more a question of the social development of a pervasive discourse, the most recent phase of which has involved the rise of the understanding and application of 'happiness' as a technical concept that has been 'operationalised' in relation to a range of social scientific fields and disciplines. In this sense, the work of McMahon, amongst others, is both the subject and object of

our analysis: effectively both informing upon the development of understandings of happiness while simultaneously illustrating how the concept has been cast, constructed, and traced in the ‘recent histories’ of the idea, which themselves feed into discourses surrounding the origins of happiness studies as an ‘emergent science’ today. After exploring and reflecting upon a series of examples drawn from the histories of happiness that have come to dominate the field in recent years, we consider the implications of a focus on the *development* of competing models of happiness over and above an attempt to arrive at a definitive, all-embracing definition of happiness, for some of the current sociological debates pertaining to this field.

Happiness as fate and luck

Thundering Zeus, lad, hath the ends of all things there be, and doeth with them what he will. There’s no mind in us men, but we live each day as it cometh like grazing cattle, knowing no whit how God shall end it. (*Elegy and Iambus Volume II* [Edmonds 1931]).

The citation above is a translation of the opening lines of a treatise by the Greek poet Semonides, circa 664–1 B.C. The sentiment expressed in these lines captures something of the fatalism of attitudes towards happiness in Greece around this period: that happiness was invariably a matter of chance, and required the blessing of gods in order for one to attain it. Ostensibly luck and fate are opposites – the former implies randomness and chance, whereas the latter involves some sense of pre-determined order and destiny – but as the statement from Semonides illustrates, the two concepts were closely related. The gods – in this case Zeus – were understood to know how the ‘ends of things’ will be, and according to their will, to determine every person’s fate ‘and doeth with them what he will’. In this, the ‘tragic’ tradition, luck was understood to pertain to how the gods determine what role we humans might play (whether that be predominantly fortunate or not) in the unfolding of our destinies. However, simultaneously, the fates were seen to be not of

our making and already known and decided: Zeus 'hath the ends of all things there be'. Whether by luck or by fate, then, the course of human events was understood to be determined not by human decision, but by what *happens to us* (McMahon 2006: 10). As McMahon observes, to this day, in almost all Indo-European languages, the terms for happiness are closely related to those pertaining to luck and fate (2006: 10). The etymological roots of the English word are in the Old Norse *happ* meaning chance, fortune, happenings, and so forth. *Happ* also forms the basis of other words like 'happenstance', 'haphazard', 'hapless', and 'perhaps'. Similarly, the German *Glück* still has the dual meaning of both happiness and luck; and the French *bonheur* is literally a compound of *bon*, good, with the old French *heur* meaning fortune or luck.

The intertwining of fate, luck and fortune is thus a motif that has an enduring consistency in historical accounts of happiness. Numerous further examples could be provided. Among them are the dramatic lyrics of the thirteenth century Goliardic poem 'O Fortuna', famously put to music in Carl Orff's cantata, *Carmina Burana*:

O Fortune, like the moon you are changeable, ever waxing and waning;
 hateful life first oppresses and then soothes as fancy takes it; poverty and
 power – it melts them like ice. Fate – monstrous and empty, you whirling
 wheel. You are malevolent. Well-being is vain and always fades to nothing,
 shadowed and veiled you plague me too; now through the game I bring my
 bare back to your villainy. Fate is against me in health and virtue, driven on
 and weighted down, always enslaved. So at this hour without delay pluck the
 vibrating strings; since Fate strikes down the strong man, everyone weep
 with me! I bemoan the wounds of Fortune with weeping eyes, for the gifts
 she made me she perversely takes away. (Krutulis 2010: 403–404)

In the poem, fate is personified as fickle, malevolent and vindictive. By contrast to the extract from Semonides, here happiness is understood to be something even more fleeting, more precarious. 'Fortuna' is understood to ensure that happiness

and wellbeing are transitory and ultimately subject to the vagaries and whims of a deity. In this sense, fate is understood to eclipse luck since, irrespective of position – both ‘poverty’ and ‘power’ can be ‘melted like ice’.

Such examples serve to demonstrate how historically peculiar and distinct are contemporary Western understandings of happiness. For a much longer period, happiness was understood to be something outside of human control. It was not something that one could ‘make’ or ‘expect’, or indeed, have the right to ‘demand’. To be happy very largely meant to be lucky, or at least, to have had the benefit of fate’s generosity. Happiness, then, was understood to reside outside the span of human control, was experienced as arbitrary, chaotic, and lacking in any kind of structure. This was fundamentally related to a more general set of social conditions which, as Elias (2012) centrally argues, typically, but by no means exclusively, fostered emotional lives that were experienced as more spontaneous, volatile, less predictable and stable, less open to individual nuance and steering than those that are characteristic of their present-day counterparts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full exposition of Elias’s arguments concerning what he refers to as ‘civilising processes’, however, for present purposes it is important to note that Elias advances these arguments concerning the long-term development of structuring of emotional lives as part of a more general thesis regarding the dynamic interplay between sociogenesis and psychogenesis – long-term social developments and psychological development. Briefly, Elias’s central thesis is that as Western societies have become increasingly structurally complex – as the, to use his language, *chains of interdependence* between people have lengthened, and social networks (figurations) have become denser – so there has mounted a net increase in the social pressure for individuals to restrain, modify, shape, and otherwise attune their affects and behaviour to take account of that of the others who surround them, and indeed the many more whom they may never meet. To summarise: long-term social developments involved in ‘civilising processes’, Elias proposes, come to be imprinted upon the human psyche; that is to say, they foster the conditions which favour a distinctive moulding of human psychic apparatus that we now consider to

be characteristic of 'the modern self'. Elias neatly summarises this tendency as the *increasing social restraint towards self-restraint*. Such processes are complex, multi-directional, non-linear, sometimes contradictory, and wide-ranging. In relation to happiness, certain elements of a former stock of associations are historically enduring, whereas others shift in a particular 'direction', following the more general 'curve' that involves the ascendancy of distinctively 'modern' social and emotional selves. Thus, as we have already suggested, while certain fatalistic associations – notably, the *happ* of happiness – persist to this day, the term began to take on a subtly yet significantly different set of associations, particularly in the Enlightenment era and the period subsequent to this.

Happiness, virtue and self-fulfilment

It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what we might loosely call the 'age of Enlightenment', that prevailing understandings of happiness in the West began to change in important respects. A central shift is exemplified by the ascendancy of Protestant ideas about predestination, justification and moral worth: developments which, in turn, were grounded within a much broader set of social processes – their relation to which was the primary focus of Weber's analysis. As Weber famously explored in his *Protestant Ethic*, through various iterations – principally Calvinist notions of predestination and Lutheran ideas about salvation – a dominant 'ethic' emerged during this period centring on the notion that people must seek to prove their moral worth through pursuing a life of virtue. Virtue might typically be exhibited through displaying proficiency in relation to a 'calling': a particular occupation, profession or vocation for which each person had been 'predestined'. In this way, devotion to God could be demonstrated through a life of toil, temperance, a sense of duty, commitment, effort and obedience.

Weber's analysis centrally considers the relationship between the rise of such beliefs and the ascendancy of capitalism. A key part of his argument is that such notions of 'virtue' find clearest expression in capitalist society in relation to an ethic that stresses the importance of making, acquiring and accumulating money – not as

a means to enjoy pleasurable pursuits and the satisfaction of needs, but increasingly, as ends in themselves. In this way, worldly 'happiness' came to be understood as something superficial: something to be avoided, even shunned – perhaps the mark of someone who had 'lost their way' to true and lasting 'fulfilment' – in the favour of achieving 'grace' and 'justification'. True happiness, then, was something to be *achieved* through a lifetime of personal endeavour and striving, through professional obligation, in the strict avoidance of all forms of spontaneous enjoyment, and ultimately, in the union with god. In a word, to be happy, one must be virtuous. Thus for Weber, the Protestant ethic of duty in a calling exemplifies a core aspect of a pervasive social ethic of capitalistic culture, the *summum bonum* of which – the accumulation of wealth – is, Weber writes:

completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonistic, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs... If we ... ask, why should 'money be made out of men', Benjamin Franklin himself, although he was a colourless deist, answers in his autobiography with a quotation from the Bible, which his strict Calvinistic father drummed into him again and again in his youth: 'Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings' (Prov. xxii. 29). (Weber 1985 [1930]: 53)

According to Weber, in this way, the earning and accumulation of material wealth, so long as it is done within the law, is a distinctively capitalist 'result and expression of virtue and proficiency in calling' (1985: 54). For our purposes here, the key observation to be drawn is that in the Enlightenment era, happiness came to be understood as something that must be 'achieved'; destiny needed to be 'fulfilled'. Despite the fixity of fate – for according to Calvinist doctrines, fates cannot be

changed – such ideas served to facilitate a shift towards the understanding that happiness resided in ‘self-fulfilment’: it was something that individuals must toil for, must *pursue* throughout their lives.

There are some important differences between the sociological analyses of Weber and Elias which, again, are beyond the scope of our discussion here. Nonetheless, a point of complementarity for present purposes at least is the documentation by both authors of growing social demands for the curbing of spontaneous impulses, pressures to resist the unrestrained sating of ‘animalic’ desires, the social pressure towards foresight: of looking towards future ends, and the related ascendancy of notions of social obligation, purpose and position. All in all, these developments marked an important step towards the idea that social and spiritual advantage – grace, favour, virtue – might be attained through ‘good selfhood’: self-*fulfilment*.

The pursuit of happiness

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the notion of the pursuit of happiness emerged as core to several processes involving state re-formation and enactment such as those subsequent to both the French (1787–99) and the American (1775–1783) revolutions; the uncoupling of divine ordination from state and religion, and changes in the orientation of religious doctrine itself; and most significantly, the growth of discourses of the ‘individual’. The emergence of American individualism and its relationship to the development of American ideas about freedom, nationhood and civilisation is complex, and in certain respects contradictory (see, for a detailed analysis, Mennell 2007). The relationship is famously explored by the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville who describes the ascending tide of American individualism as typically expressed in a, ‘mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures, and to draw apart with his family and friends; so that, after he has formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself’ ([1835–40] 1961: 118). For present purposes, we mention this ascendancy as it figures prominently in shifting understandings of happiness. Proclamations

concerning the 'sovereign individual' during the US of this period can be understood, once more, to relate to more than simply changing ideas: more than solely the rise and fall of particular political ideologies. Rather, once again following Elias's core thesis concerning processes of civilisation, their development is intimately related to a set of social processes which gradually come to foster the emotional conditions under which individuals come to experience themselves as 'selves' – as objects of their own reflection. This individualising self-relationship emerges in tandem with growing social pressure upon individuals to fine tune their affects and behaviours to increasingly complex social networks: to 'work on the self' (Elias 2012; see also Dunning and Hughes 2013).

In the American context, such individualisation found a distinctive form of articulation expressed as a kind of contract predicated upon a simultaneous separation and connection between 'the individual' and 'the state' – a relationship understood to be bridged through discrete endowments and rights. Perhaps most notably, in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson stated that individuals should have the right to pursue happiness. In the same period, George Mason – Jefferson's colleague from the Virginia Declaration of Rights – maintained that pursuing and obtaining happiness was as a 'natural' right endowed by god; resulting in the most famous, second, line of the Declaration of Independence, namely:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.
(US National Archives 2013 [1776]).

At a similar historical juncture, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, the French revolutionary leader declared in a speech to the National Convention during the height of the Jacobin revolution in France in 1794 that 'Happiness is a new idea in Europe' (cited in Marcus 1989: 350). In many and complex ways, it actually was a

new idea underpinning, legitimising and, in that sense, shaping radically new processes of state formation. However, beyond the ideational level, common to these processes was the intertwining of political states and emotional states through two codes of actualisation. Firstly, the notion of a liberated, self-actualised state organised around the needs of its citizens. And, consequently, secondly, the state provision of the *possibilities* for self-actualisation and therein the liberation and happiness of its citizens.

Thus, with the growth of state ideologies conceiving of, and purposefully reframing, power relations between their members in ways which ostensibly sought to redress happiness, two core principles of happiness came to emerge. The first was that happiness is needs-based – a principle that persists in underpinning contemporary sociological work on happiness (Diener and Diener 2000). The second was the principle of freedom to pursue happiness and, in relation to the development of this idea, the notion that it is the responsibility of the state to allow for such a pursuit. These ideas pull even further away from how happiness was conceived in antiquity, elaborating broader, socially contingent dimensions. In effect, while happiness was still hermeneutically confined to individuals in both its experience and effects, ideas of the *possibility* and *responsibility* for happiness began to intertwine political state and individual in new and increasingly more complex sets of relations.

The growing currency of the idea that people should be free to achieve happiness both drew upon, and in part found expression within, concomitant philosophical developments. An exemplar in this respect is that of such as ‘the greatest happiness principle’ – whose ambassadors include such British Enlightenment philosophers as John Stuart Mill and, John Locke, and most centrally of all Jeremy Bentham. In a thesis entitled, ‘Introduction to morals and legislation’ (1789), Bentham developed the argument that the moral qualities of human actions are determined, not by a priori moral categories – i.e. that some behaviours are intrinsically ‘good’/ ‘virtuous’ or ‘bad’/ ‘evil’ – but by the consequences of such actions for aggregate levels of human happiness. Bentham’s oft-cited maxim thus stressed the importance of

striving towards the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. This principle, wrapped up as it was with a much more general set of shifts in dominant modes of understanding and belief, marked a further step away from understandings of happiness as pre-ordained and the result of divine attribution, and, in a number of important respects, fundamentally challenged the abstemious and ascetic puritanical overtones of the Protestant ethic.

As Stephen Mennell (2007: 46) observes, the emphasis on the 'individual soul' characteristic of Calvinist principles among New England settlers can be understood as an important pre-cursor to later forms of American individualism. In a similar way, we can observe the development of sentiments that at first partly stem from, and then in key respects run counter to, aspects of the social ethic analysed by Weber: a challenge to the notion that true happiness could not be found in the pleasures of this world, and the spread of the idea that morality – and the good life – were not determined by the word of God, but were and are 'man-made'. Accordingly, 'happiness' came to be understood to be attainable both in the afterlife, and *within the world of men*. Indeed, as Locke expressed it, it was the 'business of men':

to be happy in this world, by the enjoyment of the things of nature subservient to life, health, ease, and pleasure, and by the comfortable hopes of another life when this is ended; and in the other world, by an accumulation of higher degrees of bliss in an everlasting security, we need no other knowledge for the attainment of those ends but of the history and observation of the effect and operation of natural bodies within our power, and of our duty in the management of our own actions, as far as they depend on our will, i.e. as far also as they are in our power. One of those is the proper enjoyment of our bodies, and the highest perfection of that, and the other of our souls; and to attain both of these we are fitted with faculties both of body and soul. (Locke in King 1884: 91)

Locke's proclamation begs for the pursuit of happiness both in 'body and soul'; both in worldly pleasures and in the afterlife. In this way, individuals came to be understood as being not simply responsible for their souls and their happiness in heaven, but for their happiness on earth, too. Contemporary with these developments, and in these particular locations, was the continued uncoupling of religion from 'the state', which Stearns (2012) considers integral to the timing of this happiness surge. The philosophical developments of Enlightenment thinkers occurred in the context of a shift in values underpinning a new, less strict, Christianity. This shift, while in many ways running directly counter to Calvinist doctrines, was not strictly antireligious as such; it was more that God was understood increasingly to be open to the idea of people being cheerful (2012: 106).

Through the philosophical developments of Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Bentham, the right to the pursuit of happiness became effectively a 'double-edged sword', gradually coming to transform happiness into a 'right', and, ultimately a responsibility. Thus, on the one hand, the individual seeking of happiness was understood to be perfectly legitimate, but on the other, not being or seeming happy was increasingly understood as a problem many wished to avoid (Stearns 2012). Indeed, in his highly (1961 [1835-40]) influential analysis of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville argued that regardless of the times' freedom and prosperity, underneath the pursuit of happiness lay a strange melancholy that appeared to haunt the American people. He observed that 'no one could work harder at being happy than Americans do' and still 'a cloud habitually hung on their brow' (1961: 278).

It was thus at this juncture that meanings of happiness came to incorporate ideas of individual responsibility, both of individuals towards themselves, and towards the state. In this way, the seeds of contemporary notions of citizenship based on discourses of rights and responsibilities begin to emerge, with ideas of happiness at their core. These processes involving defining individual rights based on the pursuit of happiness, legislating them in the manner of the Declaration of Independence,

built towards particular conceptions of the need for individual reflexivity, where individuals must not only be able to understand whether or not they are happy, but *why* they are not, and what they need to do to achieve happiness. In this way, understandings of happiness made a further fundamental shift: from 'outside' to 'inside' – away from fateful or lucky circumstances construed by 'external' forces such as deities, and increasingly 'internalised', and understood to be within the control of the person who seeks to be happy.

Utopias: building happier worlds

You are now in the midst of a conflict which involves the deepest and dearest interest of every individual of the human race; and upon its result depends the misery or happiness of the present and future generations. It is a contest between those who believe, that it is for their individual interest and happiness that man should continue to be kept in ignorance, and be governed, as heretofore, by force and fraud; and those who are convinced, that for his happiness, he should be henceforward governed by truth and justice only. (Owen 1842: part one, xi)

In the utopian address by the social reformer Robert Owen to his King, William IV, and to the politicians of the day, the relationship between state and citizen was transformed from one where the state provides for all citizens, to all citizens shaping the perfect state, thus changing the 'greatest happiness principle' into a:

Rational System... purposely formed to promote the well-being and happiness of every man, woman, and child, of every clime and colour [that would] by degrees amalgamate the human race into one cordially-united intelligent family, with one language, one interest, and one object, namely, the permanent happiness of all. (Owen 1842, part seven: 64).

Owen, as with many social commentators throughout history, considered that society was morally decayed and corrupt. Furthermore, he drew these observations at an historical juncture comprising enormous opportunity through the growth of 'empire', and what he considered to be the great need for self-conscious, well-organised political change. His demand for utopia combines several different conceptions of happiness. Principal amongst these are both the self-serving happiness of those who would fight for its attainment, and the 'greatest happiness' for those for whom it would be achieved. Citizens, then, were becoming understood to be not merely at liberty to pursue happiness but as the architects and engineers of 'its' design and achievement. Utopian socialists such as Owen gained popularity on account of 'their ability to give poignant voice at an early stage of the capitalist development to the ravages and uncertainties of change' (McMahon 2006: 379). However, paradoxically, it was precisely these uncertainties that fuelled a critique of happiness, and the belief that these greater, growing opportunities presented in the name of happiness were ultimately processes turning workers into greater slaves than they had ever been.

To this day, this inherent paradox – that in recognising happiness, we recognise 'its' profound absence, perhaps impossibility – persists in much Western thought. To the degree that we might accurately draw broad generalisations about the discipline, sociology has typically shared such ambivalence with regard to happiness. On the one hand, particularly after Comte and arguably Marx, a good deal of the intellectual impetus behind the growth of sociology as a discipline was based upon variants of the notion that it had the potential to assist in securing 'greater happiness for the greater number' through providing some means of understanding and, thereby, perhaps serving as the basis for the elimination of social injustice, poverty, alienation, inequality, subjugation, warfare, and the various 'ills' of 'modern life'. That self-same impetus has arguably also served as a basis for sociology to treat the concept of 'happiness' and the related field of 'happiness studies' with abject suspicion, if not outright dismissal – precisely because of its (sociology's) critical pre-occupation with the social conditions that make 'the happiness of many'

unlikely, perhaps an impossible 'utopian' ideal (for a fuller discussion of this paradox, see Kilminster 2013). Again, somewhat paradoxically, this has left assumptions about what 'happiness' 'is' or 'entails' largely unexplored (Bartram 2012).

Thus the concern for happiness increasingly came to be mobilised as an ideological motif, an ideal standard against which the progress of society might be measured. In this way, references to overall levels of happiness – or the absence thereof – came to be employed as a kind of barometer for social and political criticism, and ultimately became invoked as part of a more general critique of utilitarian principles. Significantly, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in a context of workers' protests against dropping salaries, appalling working conditions and the rising cost of food, Thomas Carlyle claimed that the 'greatest happiness principle' held by utilitarian philosophers – namely the good and happiness of the majority of the members of any state, should be the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined – was at an end:

Every pitifulest whipster that walks within a skin has his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be 'happy.' His wishes, the pitifulest whipster's, are to be fulfilled for him; his days, the pitifulest whipster's, are to flow on in ever-gentle current of enjoyment, impossible even for the gods. The prophets preach to us, Thou shalt be happy; thou shalt love pleasant things, and find them. The people clamour, Why have we not found pleasant things? (Carlyle 1843: *Past and Present*, Book 3, Chapter 4: 'Happy')

Happiness, Carlyle argued, was seen as attainable only through satisfying the interests of each person. However, within their respective fields, politicians framed their arguments around competing interests of groups; whereas for each individual person, 'interests' were intimately bound up with the conditions of their own lives. Driven by 'Mammon worship', the interests of the wealthy were triumphing over the

interests of the poor, serving merely to underscore and exacerbate their poverty. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, Carlyle suggested that the drive towards, and meanings of, happiness cannot be shared across society. Rather than the happiness principle, Carlyle proposed the 'greatest nobleness principle,' namely one built around what he considered to be the core morality of Christianity which would thus have universal applicability built into its very character. In this opus, Carlyle repeatedly argued *for* the nobleness of work, but *against* the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, he suggested that even those who had wealth, or were considered wealthy, were, so to speak, 'labouring under an illusion': wealth does not lie in the ownership or possession of fortune, but in the possession of morality, dignity and nobility. Through the pursuit of Mammon, Carlyle argued, society had become *laissez-faire*, led by an:

idle landowning aristocracy... a working aristocracy submerged in Mammonism, a gang of industrial buccaneers and pirates. A Parliament elected by bribery, a philosophy of simply looking on, of doing nothing, of *laissez-faire*, a worn out, crumbling religion, a total disappearance of all general human interest, a universal despair of trust and humanity, and in consequence a universal isolation of men in their own 'brute individuality'; (Carlyle 1843: *Past and Present*, Book 3, Chapter 13: 'Democracy').

Thus, for Carlyle, the industrial age, the 'age of machines' was characterised by delusions of wealth, interest, and happiness in which the 'freedom' proposed by utilitarian utopians was unachievable unless we turned to what he considered an 'unclassed aristocracy' (*Chartism* 1839) and a spiritual rebirth of mutually orientated individual and society (*Sartor Resartus* 1832).

Thus to summarise, 'happiness' came to be a notion that was mobilised increasingly as a political principle: an existential condition and precept. Happiness as a term increasingly invoked debates concerning the 'conditions' under which any particular individual can *be* happy. To this end, we might draw a parallel between the term

happiness (and the emergent field of happiness studies) and the term 'human' (and the related intellectual field of 'humanism'). Particularly in the wake of a post-modernist 'decentring', perhaps even rejection, of the 'human' in the 'human sciences', sociologists have come increasingly to distance themselves with any single or simple engagement with 'the human', and have become more critically reflexive concerning the 'humanistic' basis of some branches of the discipline. As Plummer (2002) observes, part of this critical discomfort stems from the Western liberal emancipatory motif effectively 'baked in' to humanism which, like modern conceptions of happiness, was a concept born of the Enlightenment. Post-modernist, and in particular, post-colonial critiques have served to demonstrate how the discourse of humanism enshrines a range of sensibilities that have long been mobilised in the service of Western triumphalism, colonial domination, and ultimately genocide. As Aimé Césaire has commented:

They (colonisers) talk to me about progress, about achievements, diseases cured, improved standards of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out (Césaire 1972: 23–24 in Plummer 2002: 297).

Just as Carlyle observed, long before any such debates arose within sociology, that one person's happiness is another's misery, so we might draw a parallel with humanism: 'your humanism is my brutalisation'. These parallels between happiness and humanism then, might again help to explain the concomitant sociological neglect of, and unease with, 'happiness' as a concept and an analytical approach, and may in this respect point to some possible ways in which 'happiness' might be 'rehabilitated' to serve a more explicit conceptual role in sociological analysis.

The cheerful robot: happiness, 'the state' and 'internal states'

As we have suggested above, a key development from Enlightenment and utopian thinking involved the principle of, or the pursuit of, happiness becoming subsumed within a more general new wave of writing on social justice, equality, and reform. Perhaps most notably, in Marx's work happiness was imagined as a mode of being that was effectively denied by the species-distancing and dehumanisation characteristic of the capitalist labour process. In a manner similar to Bentham, Owen, and Carlyle, Marx situated work, or as he conceived it, labour, as the greatest means through which people could achieve happiness but, paradoxically, Marx also conceived it as the sphere in which, under capitalism, humans are most alienated from finding personal fulfilment and worth. Even in his very early work, Marx described how 'worth can be assured only by a profession in which we are not servile tools, but in which we act independently in our own sphere' (1835). In this early Marx, we also see the germination of his thinking around how, if we have chosen our position in life, our happiness will belong to the many. As he expressed it: 'History calls those men the greatest who have ennobled themselves by working for the common good; experience acclaims as happiest the man who has made the greatest number of people happy' (Marx 1835). And while in this extract he goes on to use the example of Christ, Marx elsewhere considered that:

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo* (Marx 1844).

There are three key ideas converging here which can be seen also to find expression in later, and contemporary, conceptions of the value and purpose of happiness for society more generally. They characterise contemporary understandings of, and preoccupations with, happiness. First, Marx suggests that, for those endeavouring to make others happy, success will be rewarded with happiness; second, that happiness can be achieved through *the right sort of work*, one to which people are

‘naturally’ suited, and more importantly, work that belongs to them; and finally, that organising society so that people can own their own labour and thereby achieve happiness is universally advantageous. Thus, a flourishing society is *predicated* on the happiness of its members. Profoundly important here, for the sociological study of happiness, is the coupling of internal states – happiness – with *actions*, and in turn social conditions. In simple terms, so it follows, the happier people are, the more likely they are working to the benefit of others, and the more successful, perhaps stable, society will be.

Moreover, unlike utilitarian philosophers, Marx departed radically from the view that happiness and virtue were, for all intents and purposes, identical. Within Marx’s analysis, happiness for some groups in society would typically accompany a complete absence of virtue; and conversely, acts of virtue – such as by those who would seek to overthrow an oppressive social order – did not necessarily produce happiness, at least not in the short-term. For Marx, happiness without true freedom, without true personal expression, and without liberation from alienation was not acceptable, nor, in the strictest sense, even possible (Kain 1993: 203). Thus, within capitalist society *illusory* happiness was indeed possible, but this was not authentic, it was part of a ‘vale of tears’ that prevented authentic forms of genuine happiness – those consistent with ‘species being’ – from being realised.

Marx’s vivid conceptual imagery has to this day had an enduring impact upon much sociological thought. Cognate ideas – among them Simmel’s critique of socio-technical materialism in his essay on *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Fromm’s conception of the automaton, and Riesman’s notion of the ‘other-directed’ personality – all, in different ways, expressed disquiet about the spectre of a dystopian form of happiness, one that might indeed come to prevail with the ascendancy of industrial capitalism and modernity. Nowhere is this better summarised than by C. Wright Mills in a passage entitled ‘On reason and freedom’ in *The Sociological Imagination*:

But we must now raise the question in an ultimate form: Among contemporary men will there come to prevail, or even to flourish, what may be called The Cheerful Robot? We know of course that man can be turned into a robot... But can he be made to become a happy a cheerful and willing robot? Can he be happy in this condition, and what are the qualities and the meanings of such happiness? (Mills 1961: 171).

In other words, sociology – and again, we are obviously making this claim by invoking a high degree of generality – has at its very core a radical scepticism that happiness, particularly within the social conditions that prevail in industrial capitalist societies, is likely to be illusory. More recent expressions of this concern involve, for example, the related idea that happiness and virtue have become ephemeral, elusive, fluid and transient (see, for example, Bauman 2000, 2003, 2005; Sennett 2000).

Discussion and conclusions

Thus far we have discussed the ascendancy of contemporary understandings of happiness since the Enlightenment, first as a *state of being*, and then increasingly as a *state of society*. We have centrally explored these shifts in conjunction with a consideration of broader sets of social developments, notably processes of ‘civilisation’, state formation, and the ascendancy of industrial capitalism. Finally, as a means of developing an overall conclusion to this paper, we now turn to consider a third key approach providing for understandings of happiness, particularly in relation to contemporary happiness industries, where happiness has come to be seen increasingly as a *being state*. Where philosophical and sociological understandings of happiness serve, respectively, to exemplify the first of these two ways of thinking about happiness, the defining disciplinary framework for the third is psychology.

We can trace the development of contemporary psychological understandings of happiness within a more general epistemic shift which has been extensively

considered by Michel Foucault, namely through the growing pre-eminence of medical knowledge. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003, [1963]) and in *The Order of Things* (2002 [1966]) Foucault documents the emergence of a distinct form of consciousness in Western Europe, a different mode of self-understanding, which Foucault describes as part and parcel of an epistemological rupture consequent upon a decisive shift in the structure of knowledge. Specifically, the clinical science of medicine came to exist as part of a wider structure of organising knowledge that allowed the articulation of medicine as a discipline, making possible conditions that define 'the domain of its experience and the structure of its rationality' (2003: xv). New forms of knowledge built out of epistemological developments from the Enlightenment, reconceiving of 'the individual' which accrued diverse attention from newly emerging scientific disciplines asking an array of different questions about this 'individual', numbering among them questions about this triadic relationship between society, happiness, and actions/behaviour, and the implied threat these contained for social stability.

Across his work, Foucault explores the emergence of particular self-relationships born of the modern 'sciences of man' wherein 'the individual' is 'opened up' to the language of rationality, becoming the focus of epistemologically ascendant ways of seeing that were simultaneously ways of saying and, ultimately (in *Care of the Self*) ways of doing. In this epistemic break from what he described as 'classical' modes of thought, Foucault argued that in such emerging sciences, particularly in medicine, the individual (e.g. the patient) becomes not the mode of knowledge, but the world of objects to be known. Foucault argued for an understanding of medical science as producing a proliferation of new technologies of self-reflection and management tending towards greater self-regulation. While Foucault himself rejected the idea of a psychoanalysis of history, his work nevertheless lends itself to an understanding of how psychoanalysis itself could be counted as part of the broader swathe of such self-regulatory technologies. Psychoanalysis has, as one of its fundamental pursuits, the goal of self-knowledge. It is ancestor to a colossal panoply of hybrid therapeutic approaches seeking to address questions directly related to happiness, or the lack

thereof. Through the expert manipulation of therapeutic narratives, the goal of these technologies is precisely to make people happier so that they are able to situate themselves more effectively within their social contexts.

Happiness has thus emerged as a *function* of human existence, an expectation which, if thwarted, needs to be addressed through expert intervention. Indeed, we might understand the development of the happiness studies 'movement' – to the extent that we might adequately refer to it as such – itself as intimately related to the rise of a particular kind of self-relationship, and the notion that happiness is the mark of self-mastery: in Foucauldian terms, of *governmentality* – a skill to be cultivated and perfected. '[S]wallow a pill, get happy; do yoga, find bliss; hire a life coach, regain your self-esteem' (Schoch, 2006: 1).

The ascendancy of happiness as a technology of the self, then, marks a relatively recent stage in the long-term development of understandings of happiness, but in that context, one that has its origins in a series of antecedent developments. In our brief overview, we have documented a series of processes in which happiness as a concept, an idea, an ideal, and most recently, as an 'industry' have emerged and transformed. To state it boldly, understandings have shifted dramatically away from the notion that happiness is something 'ascribed' and towards something that is 'achieved'. From at one time being understood as a consequence of what happened *to* a person – the consequence of luck, fortune, fate, and so forth – increasingly happiness is understood as something *within* human control. From an 'external' 'force', to an 'internal' 'state'. This shift towards the understanding of happiness as something amenable to human control was, we have argued, intimately related to much broader sociogenetic shifts which fostered the conditions for a structuring of emotional lives marked by greater reflexivity, restraint, and more openness to individual nuance. Drawing upon the work of Elias, we have tentatively explored the dynamic interplay between growing social structural complexity and shifting demands upon the psyche – social constraints towards self-restraints – which we

suggest, in turn, have informed long-term developments in understandings of happiness.

We have argued that a decisive shift of direction, in this respect, was marked at first by the ascendancy of Protestant ideas of predestination and justification, particularly as these found expression in a capitalist work ethic, chiefly since these involved a move towards the individualisation of happiness. Such ideas, we have suggested, found later expression in the notion of happiness as self-fulfilment and, somewhat paradoxically, paved the way for more secular understandings of happiness in body as well as 'soul': as residing equally in earthly joys and pleasures as spiritual destination. In tandem with such processes, and as a development from them, we have documented the rise of notions of happiness in relation to models of citizenship, where the pursuit of happiness increasingly came to be understood as an individual right and a responsibility for the state. In this way, understandings of happiness became intimately bound up with notions of social justice, inequality, and reform, undergirding a paradox that has maintained an enduring significance in much of Western thought: that in understanding and pursuing happiness as a utopian ideal, we become acutely aware of its absence, and perhaps its impossibility, 'for the greater number'.

Nowhere has this paradoxical ambivalence towards happiness become more apparent than in the discipline of sociology. With a few notable exceptions (see, in particular, Veenhoven and Bartram; also, with a growing membership, the British Sociological Association's Happiness Study Group), sociologists have tended to neglect, perhaps even dismiss, happiness as a legitimate object for social analysis. And yet, we have argued, much of the momentum behind the development of sociology as a discipline, and arguably much of its critical impetus to this day, has been informed by a concern with unhappiness, discontent, and the uncertain possibility of 'genuine' happiness for particular groups, perhaps humanity as a whole. We have already speculated on why this is so, noting the predominance of understandings of happiness as illusory, and more recently, elusory. However, in

offering an account of the sociogenesis of understandings of happiness, our aim has also been to consider the implications of a shift from a preoccupation with debates concerning the *classification* of 'happiness' and towards a concern with the development of understandings of happiness – including those in which the issue of classification has come to the fore – for debates *within* the sociology of happiness. To this end, we offer a few further, tentative reflections.

Commonly, in sociology (as well as in positive psychology and behavioural economics), definitions of happiness characteristically focus upon the purported mental, emotional, or behavioural processes that are understood to *lead to* happiness. Following from such 'criteria', Veenhoven (2006) categorises four types of definitions that see happiness as life-satisfaction: affective, cognitive, attitudinal, and mixed definitions. When depicted as an affective phenomenon, happiness is an emotion and is understood as an overall evaluation of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, or how the sum of these experiences balances out (Wessman & Ricks 1966; Fordyce 1972; Bentham 1789; Kahneman 2000). As a cognitive phenomenon, happiness is the result of a deliberate evaluation process according to one's chosen criteria (Veenhoven 2006); the smaller the distance between one's aspirations and one's reality, the greater the level of perceived happiness (Schmitz 1930; Annas 2004; McDowell & Newell 1987). In the third category of definitions, happiness is often depicted as a positive attitude towards one's life. Finally, mixed definitions can integrate affect, cognition or attitude into the same understanding. For example, Ed Diener (1997) combines attitude with affect in his definition of subjective wellbeing; which, in this case, means being satisfied with your own life while feeling good.

Among the most influential definitions within sociology, in the sense that it is commonly used as a guidance in creating sociological surveys to measure levels of happiness, is that developed by Ruut Veenhoven in 1984, as, 'the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favourably' (1984: 22–24). Thus defined, Veenhoven operationalises happiness as predominantly an attitudinal state. According to this definition, when people globally assess their

overall level of happiness (satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole), they do so by appealing to two distinct sources of information, mainly *affect* and *cognition*. Seen this way, happiness has two sub-levels or components; the first is the *hedonic level of affect*, which is the sum or the balance of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences; and the second one is *contentment*, which stems from cognitive comparison (the perceived realisation of wants and needs).

What these definitions of happiness share, then, is the persistent conceptual image of happiness as essentially, an, or an aspect of, individual 'feeling' and/or cognition. As Bartram (2012: 645) succinctly summarises it, 'Happiness is the affective component of subjective well-being, while "life satisfaction" is the cognitive component, the evaluations we make about how well our lives are going'. What is striking, given our account of the sociogenesis of happiness, is how peculiarly 'modern' such definitions are. That is to say, such definitions rely on a view of happiness as residing 'within' 'the individual', and are intimately related to historically specific designations in which happiness has become inextricably tied to aspects of a 'stratified self'. Elias has referred to this manner of conceptual and definitional imagery as *homo clausus*; literally meaning 'closed person' (see, for example, Elias 2012: 522–526). Elias's argues that the predominance of this conception of humans in much contemporary social scientific writing and conceptual architecture is based in a much broader set of social processes. These 'civilising processes', which we have touched upon in earlier sections of this paper, underpin the spread of a particular form of self-experience – one of 'me in here' and 'society out there' – which is in fact an existentially-derived cognition based upon psychogenetically instilled affect restraints accompanying shifting social dynamics (Elias 2012: 523). Elias advances a relational sociology based upon an image of *homines aperti* – open, interdependent pluralities of humans – as a means of overcoming this dominant conception, which, he suggests, in turn underpins such dichotomies as the individual–society, structure–agency, mind–body, culture–nature, and so forth that are commonly encountered in much social scientific thinking. We shall leave the question of what a 'relational sociology' of 'happiness'

might comprise to subsequent analyses. However, for the moment, it is worth noting that recent work in the sociology of emotions has begun to embrace the radically relational conceptualisation of emotions advanced by Elias, amongst others (see, in particular, Burkitt 2014), and has come to challenge the idea that happiness is one of several ‘basic’ emotions that, like fundamental human essences, reside in ‘us all’. The very notion, then, that happiness is a common emotion – and at that, one that can meaningfully be said to pervade all cultures in all historical periods – which ‘in itself’ can ‘flourish’, in this context or that – is now increasingly coming to be challenged.

Ultimately, if we jettison some aspects of these peculiarly modern formulations, we might reclaim ‘happiness’ as a properly sociological concern through its conceptual rehabilitation via more relational formulations – as consisting *of* shifting human relationships, rather than simply ‘within’ these. Such an enterprise involves a more general shift that Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) has termed a ‘relational turn’, where the substantialist conception of ‘the’ individual, knowledgeable, affective human agent operating ‘within’ a ‘social context’ – the ostensible starting point for much current research within the field of happiness studies – is replaced with more fundamentally relational alternatives (see, for a fuller account of these issues Dunning and Hughes 2013). Indeed, it is precisely through developing alternative models of happiness in which the individualistic and psychologistic ‘hangovers’ of the term that stem directly from a specifically Western trajectory of sociogenesis, that we might allow for a reconciliation of happiness studies with some of the key branches of contemporary sociology.

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Notes

¹ The extent to which we might consider happiness studies to constitute a 'science', and at that a 'new' one is of course a topic of some considerable debate and controversy. Indeed, a number of sociologists have become interested in the manner in which happiness studies, and related fields such as positive psychology, employ the rhetoric of science as part of ongoing legitimization contests (see, for example, Hughes 2005; McDonald & O'Callahan 2008). The rise of what Sarah Ahmed calls the 'happiness industry', including the importance of boundary work (Sismondo 2004) pertaining to its attempts to maintain scientific legitimacy, particularly in the face of increasing public and intellectual skepticism constitutes a topic of considerable potential.