

Happiness: the science behind your smile

By Daniel Nettle. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005. 224pp. £9.99.

Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.

(Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield*)

Money won't buy happiness, but it will pay the salaries of a large research staff to study the problem.

(Bill Vaughn)

I imagine that many readers of this journal will be unaware (as I was before being asked to review this book) that the study of happiness is no longer confined to departments of philosophy but has become a large academic industry. The doyen of the field is Ruud Veenhoven, Professor of Happiness Studies at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, who founded the *Journal of Happiness Studies* in 1999 and maintains the World Database of Happiness on the Internet. The latter contains 8,000 pieces of research on every conceivable aspect of the subject. One entry is a list of the average degree of happiness in 90 countries between 1990 and 2000. There are no prizes for guessing the general drift. Denmark, Malta and Switzerland are top with 8 out of 10 and Zimbabwe and Tanzania come bottom with 3.3 and 3.2 respectively. In case you wondered, Ireland (7.8) and Australia (7.3) are happier than Britain (7.2). India comes relatively low at 5.2 but this may partly be explained by the fact that when a woman in Kerala was asked whether she was happy, she replied, 'I don't know, I'll have to ask my husband'. On a statistical basis, it is likely she was relatively happy because married people are happier than singles or divorced people. One unexplained finding is that homosexuals in a long-term relationship are unhappier than their heterosexual peers, even in highly tolerant countries like Holland and Denmark. One might wonder whether this is because they do not have the benefit of children. However, happiness research shows that children have a detrimental effect on relationships and happiness, at least in the first fifteen years after their birth.

Thus, there is a great deal of scientific research on what makes people happy and hence the pabulum of a book summarising it. The book itself is a small yellow hardback, the sort of 'stocking filler' one finds in piles at the local bookshop from November onwards. It is not clear what the intended audience is. The size and bright yellow cover suggests the general public, as does the fact that when the term neuron is introduced, it is followed in parentheses by 'brain cell'. The, at times, annoyingly chatty tone also suggests a non-professional audience. As examples of the style, consider the following:

What does it mean for our satisfaction that the magazines on every news stand are full of airbrushed images of lipo-sucked supermodels and tales of men who ski off glaciers with world leaders, and list their hobbies as judo, chess, and the Kama Sutra (in the original Sanskrit, of course)?

Or, in relation to the fact that whether you are neurotic or extrovert apparently contributes 17% to total happiness:

If you want to know how happy Bob will be in ten years' time, don't bother to think about the fact that he will then be in his forties, or that he is a man. Don't consider the fact that he is a dentist who will by then be in the top 5% of wage earners and have a huge house in the country. Don't even factor into your deliberations the beautiful and voluptuous wife he will meet or the three children she will bear him. Instead, have him take a personality inventory.

The author, a lecturer in psychology at Newcastle University, reviews a number of available happiness therapies such as SSRIs, cognitive behaviour therapy, religion, relinquishing desires etc. I learned that cognitive behaviour therapy doesn't make you happier, just less unhappy and, finally, in the words of John Stuart Mill, that 'Those only are happy ...who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness'. End of story.

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