

# Introduction: Towards a Critical Perspective in Happiness Research

Ever since Socrates (in Plato's Republic 352a) put forth his famous question about 'how we ought to live our lives,' happiness has not only represented one of the cardinal themes in Western thought, but it has also been perceived as being 'central to the point of human experience' (Nettle 2008, ix). While the intensity of interest in happiness in Western culture has varied across time, it is safe to argue that the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st are characterized by increased attention to this important but elusive theme. The list of self-help books offering various recipes for achieving happiness seems endless: *Happiness now!* (Holden 1999), *The Happiness Makeover: How to Teach Yourself to Be Happy and Enjoy Every Day* (Ryan 2005) and *Happy for no reason: 7 steps to being happy from the inside out* (Shimoff 2009), to name only a few.

The discourses about happiness have not only flooded the field of so-called pop-psychology, but also popular culture. Hollywood movies like the *Pursuit of Happiness* and *Eat Pray Love* testify that the cultural industries no longer sell only dreams, but also certain cultural representations of happiness. Journalists are also igniting the happiness bonfire: happiness and well-being have become common themes in both the electronic and more traditional print media like magazines and newspapers. The famous *Time* magazine, for example, dedicated a whole issue to happiness in 2005. Consumer culture is no exception, as we are increasingly sold not just products, but pure happiness. For example, Coca Cola's global campaign launched in 2009 was called *Open Happiness*, and the editorial in the IKEA 2010 catalog, entitled *Happiness*, promises 'a happier life at home' (provided that it is furnished with IKEA's furniture, of course).

On the other hand, people who doubt that happiness is a thing that can simply be bought and consumed have started engaging in various spiritual and healing practices more or less connected to new religious groups and movements that are increasingly penetrating the dominant culture. One can also educate oneself at an increasing number of conferences and seminars about happiness. From there, it is only a small step to therapy and so-called positive psychology, which opposes the traditional psychological focus on negative and pathological mental states and instead emphasizes the cultivation of positive ones.

A strong interest in happiness is also present in other academic disciplines. It is possible to observe a revival of interest in the philosophical tradition of the ‘art-of-living,’ which aims to provide philosophical answers to the question of how to lead a good and happy life. Meanwhile, more and more economists and politicians are acknowledging that the development of countries should not only be based on economic indicators like GDP, but it should also include indicators that show the well-being and happiness of their citizens. Last but not least, in the last few decades, a specialized interdisciplinary field called Happiness Studies, dedicated exclusively to the study and empirical research of happiness, has gained a lot of ground in academia.

All these recent developments, which constitute what Ahmed (2007/2008) calls ‘the happiness turn,’ represent the first reason why happiness figures as a topic worthy of an in-depth study. The second major reason to embark on a study of happiness is that even though in the last decades we have witnessed an inflation of happiness research, there have been a very few attempts to provide a more critical perspective on happiness. In addition, the existent critical approaches within the so-called critical tradition/theory mostly focus on themes that are widely regarded as inherently problematic such as the problem of material inequalities, exploitation, racism and violence. While these are certainly important areas of critical analysis, I believe that, in addition to them, certain themes that are widely accepted as positive such as happiness can indeed be problematic and hence demand critical attention. In other words, even the themes (or one could even say precisely the themes) constituting our experience that are widely accepted as positive and unproblematic can (all the more easily) be connected to relations of power in society or better yet, can be employed in order to exercise certain forms of power. The next logical step from questioning the widely assumed “intrinsically positive nature of happiness” in Western culture is to also question its universality. Is happiness really a timeless universal experience?

The book offers an interdisciplinary exploration of the origins of happiness in the Western culture that questions these widespread assumptions. As such it provides a novel critical perspective on happiness that represents an alternative to the existent body of research dominated for the last 30 years mostly by psychology. In contrast to the prevalent quantitative empirical approach I intentionally do not start by articulating a construct/definition of happiness or well-being. Drawing from anthropology, cultural studies, critical sociology and cultural history I rather trace the unfolding of wider social processes and practices in the context of which happiness (along with its main characteristics) is defined (and made meaningful) by individuals, groups of individuals and institutions. It could hence be argued that the definition of happiness actually spans across the whole book and is not limited to a condensed “a priori definition”. In this sense, the book is—epistemologically speaking—a call to “*return to happiness*”. This paradigm shift aims to affirm wider historical, social and everyday meanings and practices related to happiness as vital focus of research. The call to “return to happiness” also implies that various scientific constructs and definitions of (subjective) well-being conceived in the ivory towers of academia should be stripped of their scientific myth about representing

(more) objective models of happiness and must rather be recognized for what they are: merely one array of cultural constructions that have emerged as part of the current historical regime of happiness in Western culture.

In the first part of the book I offer a condensed overview of happiness research (Chap. 1) and an in-depth, critical review of the existent theories and research of happiness and its relation to culture (Chap. 2). To that end, the existent theories and empirical research concerning the connection between culture and happiness are critically examined and supplemented by insights from anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, history and neuroscience. This provides the basis for the provocative argument that happiness is not universal but instead a culturally and historically specific experience that emerged in the 17th and the 18th century and that is characteristic only to the Western world. With the help of a novel interdisciplinary methodological framework developed in the end of the first part (Chap. 3), the second part of the book, expands upon this argument through an analysis of the social, religious, ethical and political processes that lead to the emergence of the experience of happiness.

The second part of the book is essentially the world's first Foucauldian inspired cultural history of happiness or put in Foucauldian terms: a genealogy of happiness. Genealogy of happiness is conducted with the help of the concept of experience used by the late Foucault to make sense of his entire opus. Following from this, genealogical analysis is conducted in every chapter in the second part along the three interconnected axes of experience that, according to Foucault, constitute the experience of any object: the axis of truth, the axis of relationship to the self and the axis of power. Accordingly, every chapter in the second part is organized into three main subsections, each corresponding to one respective axis of experience.

The second part of the book starts by examining how Christianity established salvation as the cardinal ideal of human existence and why such an ideal wasn't achievable in the present life (Chap. 4). The analysis of the medieval Christian experience is concluded by arguing that it cannot be simply equated with the experience of happiness, which only emerged in the 17th and 18th century, when the ideal of human existence increasingly started to be pursued in the present life.

The first steps towards the birth of happiness are traced back to the times of the Renaissance and the Reformation movement (Chap. 5), which were still, however, mainly characterized by the Christian experience. In addition to the existent and still prevalent Christian ideal of salvation, the Renaissance movement (starting in the 15th and 16th centuries) and the Reformation movement (starting in the 16th century) introduced what I call the problematization of (good) feeling and the affirmation of everyday life, which later resulted in the experience of happiness. The problematization of (good) feeling on earth and the affirmation of everyday life for some time, therefore, coexisted with the preceding and still dominant idea of salvation, until in the 17th century the former started to slowly but surely dominate the latter.

In Chap. 6 I argue that it was precisely this transformation (in which good feeling on earth in connection with the affirmation of everyday life started becoming the primary ideal of human existence) that represented the first major development,

which marked the birth of the modern experience of happiness. The second such major development was that the ideal of human existence not only became possible already in this world, but also that it became perceived as entirely achievable with human efforts. Since the birth of happiness also established the basic structure for all later forms of happiness in Western culture, the illumination of this process is relevant not only because it can support the argument of the historical and cultural character of happiness, but also because it represents a valuable point of departure for any further inquiries into manifestations of happiness in our culture. In this regard Chap. 7 briefly outlines the development from the birth of happiness to its contemporary manifestations. Here it has to be noted that the books' main focus is on the birth of happiness in the 17th and the 18th century. Consequently the analysis of the developments after the birth of happiness conducted in Chap. 7 is less in-depth and should be seen as a point of departure of future research. As an example of the latter I conduct an analysis of modern consumer culture that is depicted as one of the main strategies of happiness in contemporary western societies. In the Conclusion (8) I recapitulate the main steps leading to the birth of happiness and argue that happiness has represented one of the central themes guiding the processes of modernization that have fundamentally determined what we experience today. Following from this, (the birth of) happiness is presented as essential to our understanding of a broader context in which important aspects of individual and social life—such as consumer culture, the modern state, economic system, science and technology, idea of progress, etc.—have emerged in the West.

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