



Wellbeing Research Centre

ANNUAL REPORT
2019-20



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The Wellbeing Research Centre is an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Oxford which focuses on the advancement of the science of wellbeing. With a founding donation from KSI Education, and the support of Harris Manchester College, the Centre is already becoming a major platform for helping communities and organizations around the world to put wellbeing at the heart of their decision-making. The Centre brings together expertise from across the university and beyond to advance our understanding of wellbeing science and in its first year has established itself as a global leader in empirical wellbeing research.

"It has been very motivating to be able to bring together academics from around the University, each bringing their own disciplinary perspective, and to help provide a platform of knowledge exchange."



What a year it has been. The Centre was formally launched at a University event in Hong Kong on September 7th, 2019. While only a year ago it seems more like a decade, and not just because of a global pandemic changing our way of living. Our Centre took a flying start and has become a thriving research group with a large network of associated scholars from around the University and beyond that help us in myriad ways. Yet this is only the beginning of our story and the excitement for the future is palpable.

It is hard to believe that in the space of a year we have gone from being non-existent to being cited and recognized across the world's media and that we have become an academic partner to the World Happiness Report alongside world-class institutions such as Columbia's Centre for Sustainable Development and the LSE's Centre for Economic Performance. None of this would have been possible without the visionary founding donation of KSI Education and the support of our College. Generous donors who also joined us this year are Andrew Barnes and Charlotte Lockhart, as well as Luke Ding. Our heartfelt thanks go to all of you for enabling our work.

Our work is perhaps best characterized by aiming to advance our understanding of human wellbeing and to become a platform for helping organizations put wellbeing at the heart of their decision-making. We do this by way of producing high-end empirical research that advances the research frontier and by way of exploring high-end pathways to impact. The quantity and quality of the research output authored by the Centre's core research group over the past year speaks for itself and I invite you to take a closer look at the important research insights that are summarized later on in this report.

Personally, it has been most inspiring to see a community of scholars take shape that works well together and cares for each other. Multiple co-authored projects are in the pipeline and the work of each research fellow has become stronger thanks to the support of others in the Centre. This is hugely inspiring to observe and is putting a solid foundation in place for the future. Furthermore, it has often been a pleasant surprise to find out about scholars working on the topic of human wellbeing while sitting in departments across the University far removed from my own. It has been very motivating to be able to bring together academics from around the University, each bringing their own disciplinary perspective, and to help provide a platform of knowledge exchange. In turn, this platform also helps put the University of Oxford on the map as a true hub for this important line of research—more so, in fact, than I originally thought was the case.

Looking forward to 2020-21, I believe that one of our main aims will be to professionalize our operation and our communications (including the website, newsletters, etc). The recent addition of a talented Centre Manager will do wonders on this front. Another main aim will be to consolidate our finances by applying for major research grant funding in addition to the continued support of our visionary donors. Doing so will put us on a strong footing and allow us to continue to grow our Wellbeing Research Centre and its impact for many years to come.

With heartfelt gratitude for your interest and support of our work.

Sincerely,

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve

Director



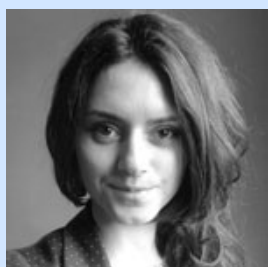
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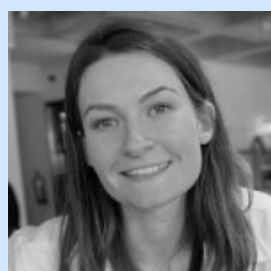
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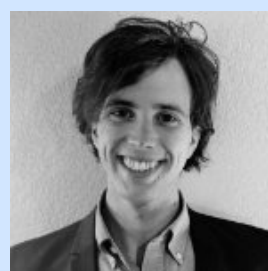
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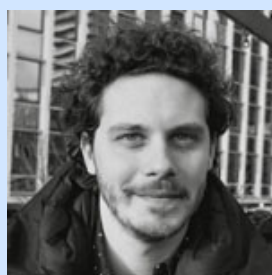
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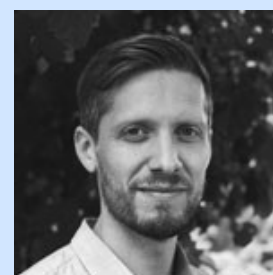
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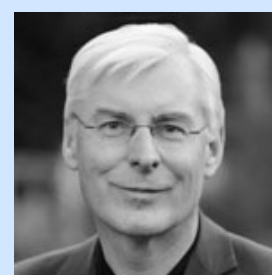
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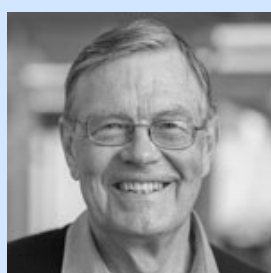
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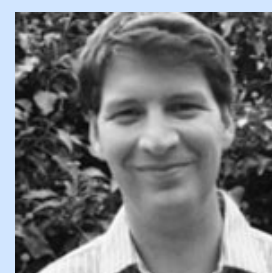
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The Wellbeing Research Centre's work has been published in some of the world's leading academic journals: *Nature*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization*, and *Science Advances*.

World Happiness Report 2020

J. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. Sachs, J-E. De Neve (2020)

New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network

The World Happiness Report is a landmark survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be. The World Happiness Report 2020 for the first time ranks cities around the world by their subjective well-being and digs more deeply into how the social, urban and natural environments combine to affect our happiness.

People do Not Adapt. New Analyses of the Dynamic Effects of Own and Reference Income on Life Satisfaction

C. Kaiser (2020) *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol 177, Pp. 494-513

Do people adapt to changes in income? In contradiction to much of the previous literature, I find no evidence of adaptation to income in GSOEP (1984–2015) and UKHLS (1996–2017) data. Furthermore, I find that people also do not adapt to changes in reference income. Instead, reference income effects may be subject to reinforcement over time. Following the empirical approach of Vendrik (2013), I obtain these findings by estimating life satisfaction equations in which contemporaneous and lagged terms for a respondent's own household income and their estimated reference income are simultaneously entered. Additionally, I instrument for own income and include lags of a large set of controls. What was found to be adaptation to raw household income in previous studies turns out to have been driven by reinforcement of an initially small negative effect of household size that grows large over time. Implications of this result for the estimation of equivalence scales with subjective data are discussed.

When to Release the Lockdown? A Wellbeing Framework for Analysing Costs and Benefits
R. Layard, A. Clark, J-E. De Neve, C. Krekel, D. Fancourt, N. Hey, and G. O'Donnell (2020) CEP Occasional Paper No.49

In choosing when to end the lockdown, policy-makers have to balance the impact of the decision upon incomes, unemployment, mental health, public confidence and many other factors, as well as (of course) upon the number of deaths from COVID-19. To facilitate the decision it is helpful to forecast each factor using a single metric. We use as our metric the number of Wellbeing-Years resulting from each date of ending the lockdown. This new metric makes it possible to compare the impact of each factor in a way that is relevant to all public policy decisions.

Inequality and Social Rank: Income Increases Buy More Life Satisfaction in More Equal Countries
E. Quispe-Torreblanca, G. Brown, C. Boyce, A. Wood, and J-E. De Neve (2020)
Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin

How do income and income inequality combine to influence subjective well-being? We examined the relation between income and life satisfaction in different societies, and found large effects of income inequality within a society on the relationship between individuals' incomes and their life satisfaction. The income—satisfaction gradient is steeper in countries with more equal income distributions, such that the positive effect of a 10% increase in income on life satisfaction is more than twice as large in a country with low income inequality as it is in a country with high income inequality. These findings are predicted by an income rank hypothesis according to which life satisfaction is derived from social rank. A fixed increment in income confers a greater increment in social position in a more equal society. Income inequality may influence people's preferences, such that people's life satisfaction is determined more strongly by their income in unequal societies.

Are Happier People More Compliant? Global Evidence From Three Large-Scale Surveys During Covid-19 Lockdowns
C. Krekel, S. Swanke, J-E. De Neve, and D. Fancourt (2020) PsyArXiv

Around the world, governments have been asking their citizens to substantially change their behaviour for a prolonged period of time, by practising physical distancing and staying at home, to contain the spread of Covid-19. Are happier people more willing to comply with these measures? Using three independent surveys covering about 119,000 adult respondents across 35 countries, including longitudinal data from the UK, we found that past and present happiness predicts compliance during lockdown. The relationship is stronger for those with higher levels of happiness. A negative mood, or loss in happiness, predicts lower compliance. We explored risk-avoidance and pro-social motivations for this relationship, and found that motivations for compliance are not uniformly distributed but dependent on personal characteristics and context: people who are older or have certain medical preconditions seem to be predominantly motivated by risk-avoidance, whereas motivations of people who are less at risk of Covid-19 seem more mixed. Our findings have implications for policy design, targeting, and communication.

Sustainable Development and Human Well-Being

J.-E. De Neve, J. Sachs (2020) In: J. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. Sachs, and J-E. De Neve (eds) World Happiness Report

This chapter explores the empirical links between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and human well-being. The SDGs were ratified in 2015 as the successor to the Millennium Development Goals and have a target date of 2030. The goals measure different aspects of the economic, social and environmental development within countries. To empirically explore the linkages between sustainable development and well-being we combine two major data gathering efforts. We leverage the SDG Index[1], which measures how far along countries are in the process of achieving the SDGs. We also use the Gallup World Poll, which is a survey that is representative of about 98% of the world's population and includes an item on how people evaluate the quality of their lives, which we will henceforth refer to as subjective well-being (SWB). Data on other dimensions of subjective well-being, such as the experience of positive and negative emotions, will be referred to explicitly rather than as elements of a more broadly defined SWB. Combining the Gallup World Poll and SDG Index data sets enables us to empirically explore how sustainable development relates to the way people experience their lives.

Why Time Poverty Matters for Individuals, Organisations and Nations

L. Giurge, A. Whillans, C. West (2020) Nature Human Behaviour

Over the last two decades, global wealth has risen. Yet material affluence has not translated into time affluence. Most people report feeling persistently 'time poor'—like they have too many things to do and not enough time to do them. Time poverty is linked to lower well-being, physical health and productivity. Individuals, organisations and policymakers often overlook the pernicious effects of time poverty. Billions of dollars are spent each year to alleviate material poverty, while time poverty is often ignored or exacerbated. In this Perspective, we discuss the societal, organisational, institutional and psychological factors that explain why time poverty is often under appreciated. We argue that scientists, policymakers and organisational leaders should devote more attention and resources toward understanding and reducing time poverty to promote psychological and economic well-being.

Three Tips to Avoid WFH Burnout

L. Giurge, V. Bohns (2020) Harvard Business Review

Millions around the globe have made a sudden transition to remote work amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, this has some employers concerned about maintaining employee productivity. But what they really should be concerned about in this unprecedented situation is a longer-term risk: employee burnout. This article suggests three tips for avoiding working from home burnout: maintain physical and social boundaries, maintain temporal boundaries as much as possible, and focus on your most important work.

Feeling Good or Feeling Better?

A. Prati and C. Senik (2020) IZA Discussion Paper No. 13166

Can people remember correctly their past well-being? We study three national surveys of the British, German and French population, where more than 50,000 European citizens were asked questions about their current and past life satisfaction. We uncover systematic biases in recalled subjective well-being: on average, people tend to overstate the improvement in their well-being over time and to understate their past happiness. But this aggregate figure hides a deep asymmetry: while happy people recall the evolution of their life to be better than it was, unhappy ones tend to exaggerate its worsening. It thus seems that feeling happy today implies feeling better than yesterday. These results offer an explanation of why happy people are more optimistic, perceive risks to be lower and are more open to new experiences.

Cities and happiness: A global ranking and analysis**J.-E. De Neve, C. Krekel (2020) In: J. Helliwell, R. Layard, J. Sachs, and J.-E. De Neve (eds) World Happiness Report**

In this chapter, we provide the first-ever global ranking and analysis of cities' happiness. Allowing for an efficient division of labour, cities bring with them agglomeration and productivity benefits, inspiring new ideas and innovations, and the generation of higher incomes and living standards. At the same time, however, cities create negative externalities such as urban sprawl, crime, congestion, and often hazardous pollution levels. As half of the world's population is living in cities today, and since this number is expected to rise to two thirds by the middle of the century, studying how city dwellers fare on balance when it comes to their quality of life is an important undertaking. Casting an anchor, and continuously monitoring and benchmarking city dwellers' quality of life around the world, is also an important step towards implementing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Life Satisfaction and Its Discontents**M. Plant (2020) Working Paper, Happier Lives Institute**

While life satisfaction theories (LST) of well-being are barely discussed in philosophy, they are popular among social scientists and wider society. When philosophers have discussed LST, they are taken to be a distinct alternative to the three canonical accounts of well-being—hedonism, desire theories, the objective list. This essay makes three main claims. First, on closer inspection, LST are indistinguishable from a type of desire theory—the global desire theory. Second, the life satisfaction/global desire theories are the only subjectivist accounts of well-being in the sense that they maintain individuals decide what makes their lives go well for them; hedonism and other desire theories are subjectivist only in some alternative senses. Third, subjectivism is implausible, although for different reasons from those that are usually given. I examine what I take to be the two main current objections to LST and argue that they are unproblematic. I then raise two different, challenging objections. The first is novel. The second has been noted in passing, but its seriousness underestimated. I close by sketching some non-obvious difficulties that subjectivists will face if they attempt to show rival objectivist theories suffer even more counterintuitive implications. Although subjectivism has a strong intuitive pull, we should be ready to abandon it in favour of an objectivist theory—although it is not my purpose here to say which one.

(Un)Happiness and voting in US Presidential elections**G. Ward, J.-E. De Neve, L.H. Ungar, J.C. Eichstaedt (2020) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**

A rapidly growing literature has attempted to explain Donald Trump's success in the 2016 U.S. presidential election as a result of a wide variety of differences in individual characteristics, attitudes, and social processes. We propose that the economic and psychological processes previously established have in common that they generated or electorally capitalized on unhappiness in the electorate, which emerges as a powerful high-level predictor of the 2016 electoral outcome. Drawing on a large data set covering over 2 million individual surveys, which we aggregated to the county level, we find that low levels of evaluative, experienced, and eudaemonic subjective well-being (SWB) are strongly predictive of Trump's victory, accounting for an exhaustive list of demographic, ideological, and socioeconomic covariates and robustness checks. County-level future life evaluation alone correlates with the Trump vote share over Republican baselines at $r = -.78$ in the raw data, a magnitude rarely seen in the social sciences. We show similar findings when examining the association between individual-level life satisfaction and Trump voting. Low levels of SWB also predict anti-incumbent voting at the 2012 election, both at the county and individual level. The findings suggest that SWB is a powerful high-level marker of (dis)content and that SWB should be routinely considered alongside economic explanations of electoral choice.

Bowling with Trump: Economic anxiety, racial identification, and well-being in the 2016 Presidential election
M. Fabian, R. Breunig, J.-E. De Neve (2020) IZA Discussion Paper No. 13022

We use well-being data from the Gallup Daily Poll and a measure of racial animus derived from Google search data to explain why racial identification became politically salient in the 2016 Presidential Election. We find that the oft-observed positive relationship between racial animus and Trump's vote share is eliminated by introducing an interaction between racial animus and a measure of the basic psychological need for relatedness. We also find that rates of worry have a strong and significant positive association with Trump's vote share, but this is offset by high levels of relatedness. Together, these two results imply that racial voting behavior in 2016 was driven by a desire for in-group affiliation as a way of buffering against economic and cultural anxiety. Such behavior is well established in laboratory studies in self-determination theory and worldview defence theory. We find no effect on Trump's performance from social capital or exposure to trade shocks. This suggests that the economic roots of Trump's success may be overstated and that the need for relatedness is a key underlying driver of contemporary political trends in the US.

A Local Community Course that Raises Mental Wellbeing and Pro-Sociality
C. Krekel, J.-E. De Neve, D. Fancourt, R. Layard (2020) CEP Discussion Paper, 1671, 2019

Although correlates of mental wellbeing have been extensively studied, relatively little is known about how to effectively raise mental wellbeing in local communities by means of intervention. We conduct a randomised controlled trial of the "Exploring What Matters" course, a scalable social-psychological intervention aimed at raising general adult population mental wellbeing and pro-sociality. The manualised course is run by non-expert volunteers in their local communities and to date has been conducted in more than 26 countries around the world. We find that it has strong, positive causal effects on participants' self-reported subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction increases by about 63% of a standard deviation) and pro-sociality (social trust increases by about 53% of a standard deviation) while reducing measures of mental ill health (PHQ-9 and GAD-7 decrease by about 50% and 42% of a standard deviation, respectively). Impacts seem to be sustained two months post-treatment. We complement self-reported outcomes with biomarkers collected through saliva samples, including cortisol and a range of cytokines involved in inflammatory response. These move consistently into the hypothesised direction but are noisy and do not reach statistical significance at conventional levels.

The Economics of Happiness [Book]
Edited volume by Mariano Rojas, featuring the Wellbeing Research Centre's own Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Dr Lucia Macchia and Casper Kaiser

This book presents a panoramic view of the implications from Richard Easterlin's ground breaking work on happiness and economics. Contributions in the book show the relevance of the Easterlin Paradox to main areas, such as the relationship between income and happiness, the relationship between economic growth and well-being, conceptions of progress and development, design and evaluation of policies for well-being, and the use of happiness research to address welfare economics issues. This book is unique in the sense that it gathers contributions from senior and top researchers in the economics of happiness, whom have played a central role in the consolidation of happiness economics, as well as promising young scholars, showing the current dynamism and consolidation of happiness economics.

Does employee happiness have an impact on productivity?
C. Bellet, J.-E. De Neve, G. Ward (2019) CEP Discussion Paper, 1655

This article provides quasi-experimental evidence on the relationship between employee happiness and productivity in the field. We study the universe of call center sales workers at British Telecom (BT), one of the United Kingdom's largest private employers. We measure their happiness over a 6 month period using a novel weekly survey instrument, and link these reports with highly detailed administrative data on workplace behaviors and various measures of employee performance. Exploiting exogenous variation in employee happiness arising from weather shocks local to each of the 11 call centers, we document a strong causal effect of worker happiness on sales. This is driven by employees working more effectively on the intensive margin by making more calls per hour, adhering more closely to their workflow schedule, and converting more calls into sales when they are happier. In our restrictive setting, we find no effects on the extensive margin of happiness on various measures of high-frequency labor supply such as attendance and break-taking.

What makes for a good job? Evidence using subjective wellbeing data**C. Krekel, G. Ward, J.-E. De Neve (2019) *The Economics of Happiness*, M. Rojas (Ed.), Springer**

We study what makes for a good job, by looking at which workplace characteristics are conducive or detrimental to job satisfaction. Using data from 37 countries around the world in the 2015 Work Orientations module of the International Social Survey Programme, we find that having an interesting job and good relationships at work, especially with management, are the strongest positive predictors of how satisfied employees are with their jobs, along with wages. Stressful or dangerous jobs, as well as those that interfere with family life, have the strongest negative correlation with job satisfaction. We discuss implications for firms and other organisations as well as for public policy-makers, and point toward future avenues for research in the area.

How threatening are transformations of reported happiness to subjective wellbeing research?**C. Kaiser, M.C.M Vendrik (2019) *SOCARXIV*, Center for Open Science**

A recent paper by Bond & Lang (2018) forcefully argues that the results of most happiness research are reversible. If they are right, empirical happiness research is in crisis. In this paper, we make four related contributions. First, we show that B&L's reversal conditions imply that respondents answer happiness questions in a manner that is implausible and which is contradicted by previous empirical research. Second, we show that reversals are driven by effect heterogeneities across the distribution of reported happiness. Third, we give a simple procedure by which such heterogeneities can be detected and provide conditions under which OLS coefficients can be reversed by appropriately relabeling response categories. These conditions turn out to be similar to those given by Schröder & Yitzhaki (2017). Fourth, using GSOEP data, we empirically assess the plausibility of Bond & Lang's reversal conditions and check whether coefficients from OLS and fixed-effects models can be reversed. Our analysis focuses on household income, unemployment, childbirth, sickness, and marriage. Bond & Lang's reversal conditions turn out to be implausible for all these variables. Moreover, when using a full set of controls, no reversals of coefficients of the OLS and FE models are possible.

The subjective well-being political paradox: Evidence from Latin America**L. Macchia, A.C. Plagnol (2019) *The Economics of Happiness*, M. Rojas (Ed.), Springer**

The subjective well-being political paradox describes the observation that individuals are on average more satisfied with their lives in welfare states than under right-leaning (conservative) governments, which are less likely to promote welfare policies; however, at the individual level, people who identify as leaning politically more to the right show higher levels of life satisfaction than those who describe themselves as leaning to the left. This subjective well-being political paradox has previously been observed in Europe. The present study investigates whether this paradox can also be found across 18 Latin American countries by using data from 9 waves of the Latinobarómetro survey. In addition to life satisfaction, we further consider respondents' self-rated ability to meet their financial needs in a satisfactory manner, which can be seen as a proxy for satisfaction with income. Latin America is an interesting region to study this question because of its political history and the emergence of left-leaning governments during the last fifteen years. We find that people report higher life satisfaction and a better ability to meet their financial needs under left-leaning governments compared to centre and right-leaning governments. In contrast, conservative individuals report higher financial and overall well-being than liberal individuals, which confirms the subjective well-being political paradox that was also found in Europe. Our analysis includes controls for macroeconomic indicators, such as inflation and unemployment rates and GDP per capita as well as socio-demographic factors.

Employee wellbeing, productivity, and firm performance**C. Krekel, G. Ward, J.-E. De Neve (2019) *CEP Discussion Paper*, 1605**

Does higher employee wellbeing lead to higher productivity, and, ultimately, to tangible benefits to the bottom line of businesses? We survey the evidence and study this question in a meta-analysis of 339 independent research studies, including the wellbeing of 1,882,131 employees and the performance of 82,248 business units, originating from 230 independent organisations across 49 industries in the Gallup client database. We find a significant, strong positive correlation between employees' satisfaction with their company and employee productivity and customer loyalty, and a strong negative correlation with staff turnover. Ultimately, higher wellbeing at work is positively correlated with more business-unit level profitability.

Positional, mobility and reference effects: How does social class affect life satisfaction in Europe?
C. Kaiser, N. A. Trinh (2019) SocArXiv, 10 Apr

In this study, we analyse the effects of social class on life satisfaction and develop a theoretical framework that shows how social class affects life satisfaction through five pathways. Informed by this framework, we estimate the direct effects of class destination and class origin, the effect of own intergenerational class mobility as well as the effects of others' class position and mobility (so-called reference effects). To do so, we utilize European Social Survey (ESS) waves 1 to 5 (2002-2010). We obtain information on life satisfaction as well as destination and origin class for about 100,000 respondents in 32 European countries. Our mobility analyses are performed with diagonal reference models, which allow for the consistent estimation of mobility effects. We find: (1) Class destination consistently and strongly structures life satisfaction across Europe. (2) Own class mobility positively impacts life satisfaction, particularly in Eastern Europe. (3) Other's class mobility has a strong negative effect on life satisfaction. Especially the latter finding points to the hitherto neglected importance of reference effects when considering the impact of social class on life satisfaction.

Valuing time over money predicts happiness after a major life transition: A pre-registered longitudinal study of graduating students
A.V. Whillans, L. Macchia, E. Dunn (2019) Science Advances, 5-9

How does prioritizing time or money shape major life decisions and subsequent well-being? In a preregistered longitudinal study of approximately 1000 graduating university students, respondents who valued time over money chose more intrinsically rewarding activities and were happier 1 year after graduation. These results remained significant controlling for baseline happiness and potential confounds, such as materialism and socioeconomic status, and when using alternative model specifications. These findings extend previous research by showing that the tendency to value time over money is predictive not only of daily consumer choices but also of major life decisions. In addition, this research uncovers a previously unidentified mechanism—the pursuit of intrinsically motivated activities—that underlies the previously observed association between valuing time and happiness. This work sheds new light on whether, when, and how valuing time shapes happiness.

Different versions of the Easterlin Paradox: New evidence for European countries
C. Kaiser, M. C. Vendrik (2019) The Economics of Happiness, M. Rojas (Ed.), Springer

Richer people are happier than poorer people, but when a country becomes richer over time, its people do not become happier. This seemingly contradictory pair of findings of Richard Easterlin has become famous as the Easterlin Paradox. However, it was met with counterevidence. To shed more light on this controversy, we distinguish between five different versions of the paradox. These versions apply to either groups of countries or individual countries, and to either the long or the medium term. We argue that the long term is most appropriate for testing the paradox, and that tests of the paradox should always control for an autonomous time trend. Unfortunately, this requirement renders the long-term version of the paradox for individual countries untestable. We test all other versions of the paradox with Eurobarometer data from 27 European countries. We do so by estimating country-panel equations for mean life satisfaction that include trend and cyclical components of per capita GDP as regressors. When testing variants of the paradox that apply to groups of countries, we find a clear and robust confirmation of the long- and medium-term versions of the paradox for a group of nine Western and Northern European countries. Moreover, we obtain a non-robust rejection of the medium-term variant of the paradox for a set of eleven Eastern European countries. On the level of individual countries, the medium-term variant of the paradox clearly holds for the nine Western and Northern European countries, but is consistently rejected for Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Spain. In the case of the Eastern European countries, the medium-term version of the paradox is rejected for Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Poland. As the Western and Northern European countries have a high per capita GDP as compared to that of Southern and Eastern European countries, our results are in line with the finding of Proto and Rustichini (2013), who find a non-monotonic relation between per capita GDP and life satisfaction over time which is positive for poorer countries, but flat (or negative) for richer countries.

Buying happiness in an unequal world: Rank of income more strongly predicts wellbeing in unequal countries
L. Macchia, A.C. Plagnol, N. Powdthavee (2019) Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin

Does income rank matter more for well-being in more unequal countries? Using more than 160,000 observations from 24 countries worldwide, we replicate previous studies and show that the ranked position of an individual's income strongly predicts life evaluation and positive daily emotional experiences, whereas absolute and reference income generally have weak or no effects. Furthermore, we find the association between income rank and an individual's well-being to be significantly larger in countries where income inequality, represented by the share of taxable income held by the top 1% of income earners, is high. These results are robust to using an alternative measure of income inequality and different reference group specifications. Our findings suggest that people in more unequal societies place greater weight on the pursuit of higher income ranks, which may contribute to enduring income inequality in places where greater well-being can be bought from moving up the income ladder.

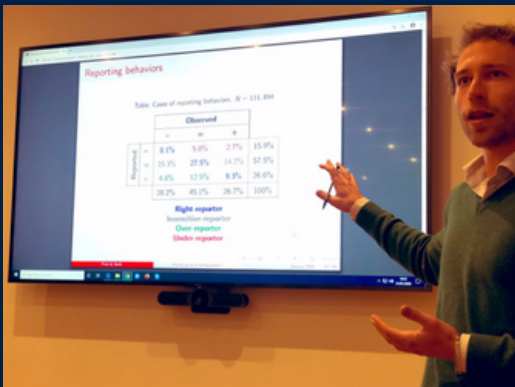
Leisure beliefs and the subjective well-being of nations
L. Macchia, A. V. Whillans (2019) The Journal of Positive Psychology

The policies of most governments focus on improving material prosperity. Yet, wealth only weakly predicts well-being. It is therefore important to understand whether factors other than money shape the happiness of nations. Here, we construct a data set of 79 countries (N = 220,000) and explore whether differences in the prioritization of time (leisure) vs. money (work) explain cross-country differences in happiness. Consistent with our predictions, countries whose citizens value leisure more than work report higher subjective well-being at the country and individual level. These effects hold in high and low GDP countries. Critically, we find evidence for a novel mechanism: people who value leisure over work are less negatively impacted by financial instability. Moving beyond individual welfare, the value that nations place on leisure vs. work fundamentally shapes happiness.

The motivational cost of inequality: Pay gaps reduce the willingness to pursue rewards
F. Gesiarz, J.-E. De Neve, T. Sharot (2019) CEP Discussion Paper No 1664

Factors beyond a person's control, such as demographic characteristics at birth, often influence the availability of rewards an individual can expect for their efforts. We know surprisingly little how such pay-gaps due to random differences in opportunities impact human motivation. To test this we designed a study in which we arbitrarily varied the reward offered to each participant in a group for performing the same task. Participants then had to decide whether or not they were willing to exert effort to receive their reward. Unfairness reduced participants' motivation to pursue rewards even when their relative position in the distribution was high, despite the decision being of no benefit to others and reducing reward for oneself. This relationship was partially mediated by participants' feelings. In particular, large disparity was associated with greater unhappiness, which was associated with lower willingness to work – even when controlling for absolute reward and its relative value, both of which also affected decisions to pursue rewards. Our findings suggest pay-gaps can trigger psychological dynamics that hurt productivity and well-being of all involved.

The seminars are a hub for a community of scholars to come together and share their expertise, working together to advance our understanding of empirical wellbeing science.



2019

Eileen Tipoe (Oxford)
“Time use and wellbeing”

Marta Golin (Oxford)
“The effect of broadband internet on mental health”

Caspar Kaiser (Oxford)
“How threatening are transformations of reported happiness to subjective wellbeing research?”

Michael Plant (Oxford)
“What is necessary and sufficient for interpersonal cardinality of subjective wellbeing?”

Lucia Macchia (Oxford)
“Prosocial behaviour, inequality and social mobility”

Laura Giurge (LBS & Oxford)
“Using time-based behavioural interventions to improve wellbeing”

Caspar Kaiser (Oxford)
“Using panel data to identify differential scale use in happiness reports”

Karl Overdick (Oxford)
“Estimating the effect of mass shootings on wellbeing”

Sid Bhushan & Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (Oxford)
“The SDGs and human wellbeing”

2020

Sid Bhushan (Oxford)
 "Applying machine learning to better understand human wellbeing"

Michael Plant (Oxford)
 "Can I get a little less life satisfaction, please?"

Margarida Madaleno (LSE)
 "Performative social media as a measure of wellbeing"

Shibeal O'Flaherty (King's College London)
 "Happier, Healthier Professionals: Boosting the Wellbeing of UK Social Workers Using Behavioural Science"

Andrew Oswald (Warwick)
 "Why is there so much midlife distress in affluent nations?"

Lucia Macchia (Oxford)
 "Beliefs about a just world"

Alberto Prati (Aix-Marseille School of Economics)
 "Subjective well-being and imperfect memory"

Filip Gesiarz (UCL)
 "How the wealth of foreign countries affects our well-being"



The work of the Centre's scholars has been frequently cited in the global media and featured in leading publications such as Harvard Business Review, The Economist, Forbes, The Times, The Guardian, and HuffPost. We hope the impact this work has had on leaders and policy-makers will improve lives for years to come.

World Happiness Reports

The World Happiness Report is a landmark survey of the state of global happiness. The report has been published since 2012 in collaboration with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network and continues to gain global recognition as governments, organisations and civil society increasingly use wellbeing indicators to inform their policy-making decisions.



Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Reports

The Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report is produced by the Global Happiness Council and contains papers by expert working groups on wellbeing for good governance. This report provides evidence and policy recommendations on best practices to promote wellbeing.



Building Trust to Face the COVID-19 Pandemic in Developing Countries

Common measures used to contain COVID-19 in developed countries can be difficult — if not impossible — to replicate in developing countries. How can individuals practice handwashing without reliable access to clean water and soap, social distancing when living in multifamily households, or staying home when informal work provides vital daily income?



Research: Why a Covid-19 World Feels Both Tiring and Hopeful for College Students

It is easy to see why students are exhausted: loved ones are getting sick, virtual classes are energy-draining, and it is hard to focus amidst worries about repaying loans and finding a job. From virtual graduation parties to postponed internships, students are contemplating career decisions — and COVID-19 is fundamentally altering what we desire from our jobs and lives.



Don't Work on Vacation. Seriously.

Data from the 2018 American Time Use survey indicates that 30% of full-time employees report working weekends and holidays, and even when people officially have time off, that doesn't mean they stop working. Moreover, the recent global shift to remote work due to the Covid-19 crisis could further exacerbate the situation: as the formal boundaries that separate work from non-work become even more blurred, employees may feel conflicted about what time is — and isn't — meant for working.





Why the Businesses of the Future Are Honing in on Cornwall

Six months into a new decade, the working landscape has altered beyond recognition. Businesses around the world have adapted to remote working with a scale and ease beyond wildest expectations.



Is it Time We Learned to Live with the Coronavirus?

The World Health Organization warned the virus may become endemic, and some scientists warn that a 'second wave' of infections is inevitable. So how should we prepare to live with the virus?



Why a Four Day Working Week Could Save Us And the Planet

Alongside the green benefits of a four day working week, working less could also positively affect mental health. “There’s some wellbeing gains there too in addition to ecological benefits from these work from home practices and potentially a four day work week,” says Dr De Neve. “When you look at what makes people happy with their job or satisfied with life more generally, research has shown that work-life balance plays an important role.”



How Are We Coping During the Lockdown?

Andrew Castle is Leading Britain's Conversation.



Europe Inches Its Way Out of Lockdown

The coronavirus pandemic caused an unprecedented drop in self-reported happiness in the U.K., but the decline leveled off once the government put forward a clear plan. De Neve's data suggests that life satisfaction has declined across the board from before the pandemic, but more so for those under 35 than people over 60.



When will the pandemic cure be worse than the disease?

COVID-19 will be with us for some time. Are months of government-enforced lockdowns the right policy? We don't know, and as moral philosophers, we can't answer this question on our own. Empirical researchers need to take on the challenge of calculating the effects, not in terms of wealth or health, but in the ultimate currency, wellbeing.



How will humans, by nature social animals, fare when isolated?

Among the population at large, some may be especially worried. Those who have lost their jobs, who now number in the millions, may have lost not just their income, but also their identity, routine and much of their social network, says Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, head of the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford University.



3 tips to avoid WFH burnout

Millions around the globe have made a sudden transition to remote work amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, this has some employers concerned about maintaining employee productivity. But what they really should be concerned about in this unprecedented situation is a longer-term risk: employee burnout.



Research finds age 50 is the worst time to be unemployed

Unemployment poses many psychological hardships. It causes people to lose their sense of purpose. For some, it can serve as a precursor to depression. At what age are the psychological effects of unemployment most damaging? New research forthcoming in the journal Psychological Science finds the answer to be around age 50.



Coronavirus lays bare the trauma of losing your job

Understanding the health risks of COVID-19 and containing its spread has been at the centre of global focus over the past few months. But attention has now also turned to the economic impact. And, in particular, how it will affect work and the workplace.



How to maintain your mental health during a global pandemic?

The coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 11,000 people as cases continue to rise across the world. How do you protect your mental health while in self-isolation? And what measures can be taken to lessen its impact?



Business matters: UK pubs and restaurants told to close

UK pubs and restaurants told to close in an effort to slow the spread of coronavirus. Ironically, it might seem, today is World Happiness Day, the brain child the United Nations New World Order project. It's aim to advance happiness as a fundamental human right for all human beings; we speak to Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, director of the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford.



What the world's happiest country can teach us about surviving the coronavirus crisis

The timing of the annual World Happiness Report may seem unfortunate — it launched today, as the world grapples with how to react to the coronavirus pandemic without social and economic meltdown. But the report authors point to vital lessons that countries with high levels of well-being can teach us about how to survive the coronavirus crisis.



The world's happiest countries revealed: Finland keeps the top spot, Afghanistan is ranked the bleakest and the UK and U.S both climb the table

Finland has been named the happiest country in the world for the third year in a row by the World Happiness Report - and Afghanistan ranked the bleakest. The annual United Nations World Happiness Report ranks over 150 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be, according to their evaluations of their own lives.



Gardening and exercise ‘are the secrets to happiness’

Drugs might provide a temporary fix, gurus might fool the gullible and there are still some foolish enough to think that money will solve all their problems. However, anyone who has ever put the cares of the world behind them by digging potatoes will know that happiness is working the allotment.



Choosing to be happy can help during Covid-19 outbreak

Research suggests that there are several reasons that people can and should choose to be happy, even when it is a difficult choice. A 2019 study conducted by Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve from Saïd, George Ward from MIT and Clement Bellet of Erasmus University Rotterdam has found that happy workers are 13 percent more productive.



A Davos conversation on maximizing happiness, not GDP

Up for debate was whether governments should seek to make their citizens happy, and whether they could satisfactorily measure their success in doing so. Jan-Emmanuel De Neve of Oxford noted that several leaders have recently set happiness as their objective — nearly all of them women.



Lessons in happiness: how a short course can boost your wellbeing

Our research shows that a programme by charity Action for Happiness can help participants adopt a more positive outlook on life.



The Action for Happiness course on BBC News

Coverage of our scientific research showing the impact of the Action for Happiness course in boosting wellbeing in local communities.



Happy workers are more productive, research shows

How are you feeling? Your answer to this deceptively simple question will likely determine how productive you will be at work today, according to new research. A team at the University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School has produced evidence of what many people have long suspected – happier people do a better job.



Whistle while you work

Terrible working conditions have a long tradition. Early industry was marked by its dirty, dangerous factories (dark, satanic mills) and in the early 20th century, workers were forced into dull, repetitive tasks by the needs of the production line. However, in a service-based economy, it makes sense that focusing on worker morale might be a much more fruitful approach.

Why improving workplace happiness is key to solving the decade-long productivity slump

Oxford University researchers claim to have found the answer at last to the UK’s productivity woes: cheer up. That may be easier said than done on a cold morning in October, but the research by the University, in collaboration with telecoms firm BT, claims to have found a “conclusive link” between happiness and productivity. The finest minds in economics have been fretting over the UK’s decade-long slump in productivity for years.

QUARTZ *at* WORK

A big new study finds compelling evidence that happy workers are more productive

With more companies thinking about the impact of how they treat workers, it’s useful to know that a large study of call-center workers in the UK affirms what we all suspected: Employees are indeed more productive when they’re happier. The research, led by the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, UK, collected data from around 1,800 call-center workers employed by British Telecom (BT), one of the UK’s largest private employers, over a six-month period.



Here is the 'conclusive' evidence happy workers are more productive

Happy workers are up to 13% more productive, researchers at Oxford University have found. The study by Saïd Business School, conducted in the contact centres of British telecoms firm BT over a six-month period, is the first to conclusively link happiness to productivity. BT employees were asked to rate their happiness on a weekly basis for six months, via an email survey, while data on attendance, call-to-sale conversion and customer satisfaction were tracked, along with the worker’s scheduled hours and breaks.



In October 2019 the Wellbeing Research Centre team attended the OECD's 'Putting Well-being Metrics into Policy Action' workshop in Paris. Distinguished international speakers discussed innovative approaches to putting people's wellbeing at the heart of public policy.



The Wellbeing Research Centre has partnered with the international research consortium to run the largest Covid19 survey globally to measure how people cope with the situation. Over 100,000 volunteers have taken part in the survey to help inform evidence-based policy for wellbeing.



The mission of the Wellbeing Research Centre is to help communities and organizations around the world put wellbeing at the heart of their decision-making. Part of that mission is visiting other leaders in empirical wellbeing science. Since the 1970s, Bhutan’s vision has been “development with values”, in other words, Gross National Happiness. In February, Professor De Neve was invited to Bhutan to share his expertise on wellbeing and work in the Eminent Lecture Series at the Centre for Bhutan Studies.



One of the key ways the Wellbeing Research Centre has engaged with the public is via social media. Harnessing the power of Twitter has led to a loyal social media following and has driven followers to our website and academic research. We engage the public by offering insights, referring to topical articles and highlighting accessible research which is of interest to a broad audience.



800+ Twitter followers

4500+ website views

17,000+ page views

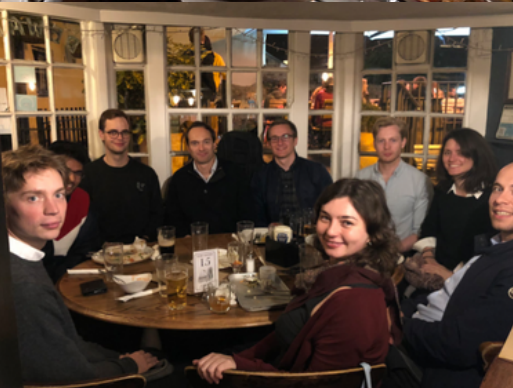
World Happiness Report
downloaded over 1,000,000 times

Most frequent website views
from UK, USA and China

Website engagement across different
ages and genders



The academic environment at Oxford University is one of the most intellectually stimulating in the world. The Wellbeing Research Centre has built a community which is a magnet for the leading scholars in empirical wellbeing science. In the past year we have invited leading academics from across the world to join us and share their expertise at meetings, seminars, dinners and social gatherings. Our enriching environment allows our scholars to enhance their own wellbeing while researching how to do the same for others around the world.



"None of this would have been possible without the visionary founding donation of KSI Education and the support of our College. Generous donors who also joined us this year are Andrew Barnes and Charlotte Lockhart, as well as Luke Ding. Our heartfelt thanks go to all of you for enabling our work."

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