University of Edinburgh  
School of Social & Political Science  
Social Anthropology  
2017-2018  

Happiness: Cross Cultural Perspectives  

Dr Neil Thin  
Email: n.thin@ed.ac.uk

Aims/learning outcomes
On completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. show better appreciation of the importance of happiness as a topic in social analysis, social policies, and ethical debate
2. show stronger awareness of the importance of evaluative judgement in social analysis, and of the deficiencies in evaluation that result from (a) inadequate cross-cultural perspectives, and (b) inadequate explicit attention to happiness as a criterion for judging social quality and quality of life
3. show better awareness of the evidence concerning the achievement of happiness in diverse contexts worldwide, and of the gaps in understanding and evidence that that need to be addressed
4. show an enriched understanding of the evolution of the social sciences through appreciating the ways in which happiness has been foregrounded in the past and backgrounded for the past 100 years

Lecture Summary

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**General texts on culture and happiness [e-access via library catalogue]:**


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**[n.b. it is also highly recommended that course participants also sign up for the free online course led by Neil Thin, on Social Wellbeing [www.futurelearn.com/courses/social-wellbeing or just Google “futurelearn social wellbeing”]]**

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**Week 1: Introduction: concepts, theories, and debates about human flourishing**

Although no serious social scientist would deny the importance of happiness in their research, remarkably few 20th-century social scientists paid systematic attention to happiness in their work. To understand the meaning and importance of the modern post-Enlightenment concept of happiness we need to explore its evolution from earlier philosophical debates about pleasure, virtue, meaning, and flourishing. Anthropologists who want to engage in happiness studies also need to be aware of the current diversity of views and empirical research on happiness from various cultures and various disciplines.

**Key Reading**

Selin, Helaine and Gareth Davey (2012) 'Introduction' In H. Selin and G. Davey (Eds.), Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non-Western Cultures. Dordrecht: Springer, pp.1-12
Haybron, Dan, ‘Happiness’. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/ [also see SEP articles on ‘wellbeing’ and ‘the meaning of life’]

**Further Optional Reading**


Journal of Happiness Studies 1:1-39


**Class discussion exercise for week 1:**
Can you identify important differences and clusters of meaning among the following terms, all of which are in some sense synonyms for ‘happiness’: pleasure, well-being, subjective well-being, quality of life, fulfilment, flourishing, fun, self-actualization, thriving, joy, fun, enjoyment, bliss, ecstasy, nirvana, life satisfaction, contentment, fortune, self-esteem, balance, harmony, mindfulness, flow, savouring; living well. [If facilities allow, we’ll do this exercise with large post-its on the wall]

**Week 2: Anthropology, other disciplines, and happiness: on the cultural traditions of academic disciplines**

Happiness was a core topic in philosophy and social science until the start of the 20th century. This class explores some of the reasons why social science in general, and social anthropology in particular, cold-shouldered the topic of happiness throughout the 20th century. We will also begin discussing whether or not this is problematic, and if so what the prospects are for a new anthropology of well-being to emerge.

We will discuss distinctively anthropological approaches to happiness, including: a strong emphasis on the way it is socially structured and learned through cultural traditions and practices; assessed and understood using ethnographic research methods and ethnographic writing; and compared crossculturally.

Today and throughout the course, please remember that ‘culture’ pertains not just to ethnic groups and countries, but to other entities including age groups, social networks, workplaces, and professional networks including academic disciplines and their associated traditions and attitudes.

**Key Reading**


Further Optional Reading
Bartram, David (2012) 'Elements of a sociological contribution to happiness studies: social context, unintended consequences, and discourses.' Social Compass 6,8:644-656

Class discussion exercise for week 2:
Separate groups will discuss: 1.reasons for anthropology’s limited engagement with happiness studies; 2. Priority areas of anthropology most in need of addressing ‘happiness’ themes; 3. most promising areas for engagement between anthropology and happiness studies

Class discussion exercises from week 2 onwards:
Sort into groups working in and out of class on specific themes (see list above, plus further guidance on course web site). Class discussion time will be used for organising the work of the groups, updating on progress, and drawing out links between specific themes and the cross-cutting themes addressed in each class. Group presentations will be in weeks 7,8, and 9. Once the groups are running, we will discuss options for timing and structuring these, but they will not be formally assessed.

Week 3: Culture and well-being: universals and cultural influences
A basic requirement of any cross-cultural enquiry into well-being or more specific aspects of it is an appreciation of how universal tendencies coexist with cultural diversity in happiness concepts, their expression, evaluation, and use in everyday life. Two important starting-points are to look at language (do people talk about happiness in
similar ways?) and at the self (how universal is the idea of a single coherent self, and the accompanying capacity for self-reflection?).

**Key Reading**
Veenhoven, Ruut (2012) 'Does happiness differ across cultures?' In H.Selin and G.Davey (Eds.), Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non-Western Cultures. Dordrecht: Springer, pp.451-472

**Further Optional Reading**
Pflug, Jan (2009) 'Folk theories of happiness: a cross-cultural comparison of conceptions of happiness in Germany and South Africa' Social Indicators Research 92,3:551-563
http://www2.bc.edu/~heinrics/ps657&658/First%20Semester%20Readings/Back_to_Basics.pdf

**Week 4: Selves, self-construal, self-making, and the meaningful life**
We all know that wants and aspirations are culturally informed. But how far and in what ways is this true of ultimate moral projects as opposed to intermediate aspirations and desires? Is there less aspiration for happiness in some cultural contexts than in others? If so, what can replace happiness as the ultimate value? If not, is the ultimate value of happiness subject to diverse emphases (e.g. individual or collective, short-term pleasure or culturally authenticated happiness, this-worldly or other-worldly happiness?)

**Key Reading**
Further Optional Reading


Week 5: Self-disclosure and empathy: communicating, hiding, and recognizing happiness

This class explores the epistemological question of how we can know about people’s emotions, given the strong cultural influences that regulate the ways in which people manage and show their emotions and notice the emotions of others. More ambitiously, it is worth considering the limits of self-empathy: given that emotional experience is inevitably not only elusive and ephemeral, but also strongly culturally inflected and influenced by social interactions, can we understand our own emotions in any confident sense? Can we really consider ‘interior’ emotional experience as private and ‘authentic’, in contrast to so-called ‘expressions’ of emotion which are partial and potentially censored and inauthentic?

Key Reading


Jie Yang (2013) "Fake happiness": counseling, potentiality, and psycho-politics in China.’ Ethos 41 3 292-312

Further Optional Reading


Linger, Daniel T. (2010) 'What is it like to be someone else?' Ethos 38,2:205-229


**Week 6: Emotional experience**

Here we explore the challenges of observing, interpreting and representing emotional experience, looking at the interplay between cultural norms and individual experiences, and between bodily feelings and the ways they are made meaningful.

**Key Reading**


**Further Optional Reading**

Biehl, João, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman [eds] (2007) Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations. Berkeley: University of California Press [but note: these anthropologists are notoriously drawn to pathological forms of subjectivity, and have almost nothing to say about happiness]

**Week 7: Assessing and comparing happiness – numerical, narrative, and visual cultures**

We turn here to epistemological and practical questions. Noting the rapid rise of public and governmental interest in positivist studies of happiness based largely on questionnaires, we will explore the potential ways in which anthropology could engage with and complement those processes.
**Key Reading**

Tay, Louis, David Chan, and Ed Diener (2014) 'The metrics of societal happiness.' Social Indicators Research 117:577-600


**Further Optional Reading**


White, Sarah C., and Shreya Jha (2014) 'The ethical imperative of qualitative methods: developing measures of subjective dimensions of well-being in Zambia and India.' Ethics and Social Welfare 8,3:262-276


Clark, Andrew E., and Claudia Senik (2011) 'Is happiness different from flourishing? Cross-country evidence from the ESS.' Revue d'Economie Politique 121: 17-34


**Week 8: Redemption: positive lessons from suffering**

We will explore the extensive anthropology of suffering, discuss what we can learn about the good life by detour of miseries and ill-treatments, and consider the potential for more balanced and evaluative anthropology.

**Key Reading**

Davies, James (2011) 'Positive and negative models of suffering: an anthropology of our shifting cultural consciousness of emotional discontent.' Anthropology of Consciousness 22,2:188 - 208

Further Optional Reading


Grinde, Bjørn (2015) ‘Why negative feelings are important when assessing well-being.’ Journal of Happiness Studies [online first]


Week 9: Using happiness research to guide policy and practice

The systematic study of deliberate happiness promotion is rapidly gaining ground, but it is still in its infancy. Search engines show that academic or nonacademic on happiness ‘happiness promotion’ are outnumbered by ‘health promotion’ by a factor of several thousand to one. In many happiness-relevant professional domains, ‘policy and practice’ are by default assumed to be either remedial (as in medicine, psychotherapy, and social policy) or aimed at the production of specific goods whose value can’t be assumed to translate into happiness (as in education, public services and industry).

Applied happiness research is therefore about radically transforming policies and practices to make them more inclusive and more aspirational. Anthropological approaches can contribute to this process in two main ways: using ethnography to enhance understanding of how happiness happens; and providing ethnographic meta-studies of global trends towards more explicit attention to happiness or wellbeing in many domains of policy and practice.
**Key Reading**

**Further Optional Reading**
Thin, Neil (Forthcoming 2016) ‘Social planning without Bentham or Aristotle: towards dignified and socially engaged wellbeing.’ in Joar Vitterso [ed], The Handbook of Eudaimonic Wellbeing. New York: Springer [to be provided on LEARN]

**Week 10. Conclusions, review and essay planning**
No further required reading, but do come prepared to discuss any particularly interesting or problematic readings, thoughts arising from the group presentations, and your approaches to the essays.

**Journals and web sites**
*Journal of Happiness Studies*
*Ethos* [not much explicitly about happiness, but it’s the key journal for psychological anthropology]
*Journal of Positive Psychology*
*Social Indicators*
*Psychology of Well-being*
*International Journal of Wellbeing*
*Emotion*
*World Database of Happiness*
Further general reading suggestions on culture, happiness, and anthropology of emotion


Appendix 1 – General Information

Students with Disabilities
The School welcomes disabled students with disabilities (including those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia) and is working to make all its courses as accessible as possible. If you have a disability special needs which means that you may require adjustments to be made to ensure access to lectures, tutorials or exams, or any other aspect of your studies, you can discuss these with your Student Support Officer or Personal Tutor who will advise on the appropriate procedures.

You can also contact the Student Disability Service, based on the University of Edinburgh, Third Floor, Main Library, You can find their details as well as information on all of the support they can offer at: http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service

Learning Resources for Undergraduates
The Study Development Team at the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) provides resources and workshops aimed at helping all students to enhance their learning skills and develop effective study techniques. Resources and workshops cover a range of topics, such as managing your own learning, reading, note-making, essay and report writing, exam preparation and exam techniques.

The study development resources are housed on ‘LearnBetter’ (undergraduate), part of Learn, the University’s virtual learning environment. Follow the link from the IAD Study Development web page to enrol: www.ed.ac.uk/iad/undergraduates

Workshops are interactive: they will give you the chance to take part in activities, have discussions, exchange strategies, share ideas and ask questions. They are 90 minutes long and held on Wednesday afternoons at 1.30pm or 3.30pm. The schedule is available from the IAD Undergraduate web page (see above).

Workshops are open to all undergraduates but you need to book in advance, using the MyEd booking system. Each workshop opens for booking two weeks before the date of...
the workshop itself. If you book and then cannot attend, please cancel in advance through MyEd so that another student can have your place. (To be fair to all students, anyone who persistently books on workshops and fails to attend may be barred from signing up for future events).

Study Development Advisors are also available for an individual consultation if you have specific questions about your own approach to studying, working more effectively, strategies for improving your learning and your academic work. Please note, however, that Study Development Advisors are not subject specialists so they cannot comment on the content of your work. They also do not check or proof read students' work.

To make an appointment with a Study Development Advisor, email iad.study@ed.ac.uk
(For support with English Language, you should contact the English Language Teaching Centre).

Guide to Using LEARN for Online Tutorial Sign-Up
The following is a guide to using LEARN to sign up for your tutorial. If you have any problems using the LEARN sign up, please contact the course secretary by email (lauren.ayre@ed.ac.uk).

Tutorial sign up will open on Monday 21 September 2015 and will close on Monday 28 September 2015.

Step 1 – Accessing LEARN course pages
Access to LEARN is through the MyEd Portal. You will be given a log-in and password during Freshers’ Week. Once you are logged into MyEd, you should see a tab called ‘Courses’ which will list the active LEARN pages for your courses under ‘myLEARN’.

Step 2 – Welcome to LEARN
Once you have clicked on the relevant course from the list, you will see the Course Content page. There will be icons for the different resources available, including one called ‘Tutorial Sign Up’. Please take note of any instructions there.

Step 3 – Signing up for your Tutorial
Clicking on Tutorial Sign Up will take you to the sign up page where all the available tutorial groups are listed along with the running time and location. Please note that on this particular course, tutorial groups are linked with small group learning projects so it is particularly crucial that you pay careful attention to arrangements for these which can only be worked out during weeks 1 and 2 once we see how many students there are on the course, and what group learning topics you all want to opt for.

Once you have selected the group you would like to attend, click on the ‘Sign up’ button. A confirmation screen will display.

IMPORTANT: If you change your mind after having chosen a tutorial you cannot go back and change it and you will need to email the course secretary. Reassignments once tutorials are full or after the sign-up period has closed will only be made in exceptional circumstances.

Tutorials have restricted numbers and it is important to sign up as soon as possible. The tutorial sign up will only be available until Monday 28 September 2015 so that everyone is registered to a group ahead of tutorials commencing in Week 2. If you have not yet signed up for a tutorial by this time you will be automatically assigned to a group which you will be expected to attend.
**External Examiner**
The External Examiner for the Social Anthropology Honours programme is: Dr Adam Reed, University of St Andrews.