Canada's Innovation Agenda
Building on our Natural Resources Advantage
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Dinner & Keynote Speaker

Some Secrets about Happiness

John Helliwell, Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia

By way of introducing the speaker, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council President Ted Hewitt noted that Halliwell's insights into the nature and meaning of happiness has broader implications for how nations and societies should conduct their affairs. "John's work exemplifies not only the role social sciences and humanities research plays in helping to create more prosperous, healthy, and just societies, but more specifically how happiness and well being can contribute to fostering and strengthening a culture of innovation."

After leading the audience in a rousing round of "If you're happy and you know it clap your hands", Helliwell pointed out that this expression of happiness is known as an "emotional report". While the social sciences have long surveyed populations to obtain such reports on various negative emotions, it is only comparatively recently that research has sought out reports on the positive emotion of happiness. More specifically, these surveys specifically ask individuals how happy they are with their lives, which calls for a much more subtle and sweeping report than simply asking about one's emotional state at the moment. Since 2010, a national survey in the UK has gone further than any other jurisdiction to ask for four distinct responses: satisfaction with life, happiness yesterday, anxiety yesterday, and purpose in life.

Helliwell added that social context was extremely significant. He also drew a further distinction made by surveys that maintain that the influence of positives in life outweighs the absence of negatives. "If you believe that, then it changes how you think about life," he said. "It certainly changes how medical practices ought to be run." By way of example, he described an experiment where students were taken to a hotel and exposed to cold viruses; whether they got sick, and how sick they became, was directly linked to the degree of their positive outlook at the time of exposure and only weakly connected to the absence of negative effects on life perception.

Helliwell's talk focused on three "secrets" to happiness, which he acknowledged are not really secrets but rather common sense observations that are seldom articulated in a clear way. The first is the importance of trust. "Intuitively people know that trust is important, but it's much more important than they think it is," he said. "And it's much more prevalent than they fear it is." Societies lacking in trust, he warned, are demonstrably stultified and will lose their vibrancy, ultimately coming apart. While evidence of this observation has generally been lacking, there are now some findings to support it. He and his colleagues enticed Statistics Canada into including a question on the general social survey that asked how likely people thought it was that a lost wallet would be returned. The published result was an expected probability of 25%, which prompted the *Toronto Star* to conduct an experiment whereby they dropped 20 wallets all over the city's downtown. Of those 16 wallets — 80% — were returned, which speaks to a significant gap between what people believe about societal trust and how members of that society actually behave.

The second “secret” revolved around generosity. Studies of this behaviour traditionally revolved around the notion that people are essentially self-interested and always seek to maximize their own economic advantage. However, Helliwell notes that once this assumption was put to the test, it was overturned. “The big surprise is that people are instinctively and universally generous and happier for being so,” he said, citing research that showed just this when test subjects were given money with the explicit instruction to give it away. Moreover, he added, people are more generous than they think they are and they get more happiness from generosity than they think they will. Curiously, this is confirmed by ancient philosophers who insisted that happiness is an outcome as opposed to a goal. Helliwell takes that to mean that if you conduct generous acts thinking it will make you happy, that will not happen; in other words, there is considerable power in not knowing that this behaviour will make you happy.

“There is a way in which the empirical psychology is starting to flesh out a lot of what previously had been armchair philosophical puzzles,” he observed. “That’s why I regarded myself as Aristotle’s research assistant when I entered this field.”

The final “secret” is collaboration, which Helliwell touted as crucial. “What makes people happy is to do things together for the benefit of others,” he explained. More significantly, he added, if the conditions for collaboration are met, innovation can proceed at an extraordinary pace. Those conditions include an organizational structure that is flat, non-hierarchical, and the absence of any dominant, overriding personality. He then discussed the surprising example of the Singapore prison system, which applied this principle to an institution that is usually held in public and bureaucratic disdain. The underlying philosophy was that of connecting prisoners to the community through joint ventures with organization such as elder care facilities. “But most importantly, the prisoners were busy discovering talents and teaching each other,” he said. “They had a shared objective for a bigger purpose and they were in it on a co-operative basis not an adversarial basis.” As an outcome, he noted, recidivism in the Singapore prison system went to below a third of where it had been, and the level has stayed there. Moreover, the prison system was regarded as the best employer in the public system and members of the public have expressed their satisfaction with seeing released prisoners moved to their area.

Similarly, peer support programs that provide support to cancer patients regularly focus on the effect these activities have on the patients, rather than the caregivers. When this perspective was investigated, researchers found even more benefits accrued to the people providing this support. “The people who were giving the peer support gained more in magnitude and it lasted longer than the people receiving it,” he said. “We hear a lot about caregiver burn-out; it’s just looking at the wrong part of the picture in an unbalanced way.”

Ron Freedman raised the issue of social inequality, which is widely discussed as a growing problem in our society. Helliwell maintained that this discussion focuses exclusively on income inequality, while ignoring five other constituents of happiness outlined in the World Happiness Report that he co-edited. He pointed to an example where birth weights for children born to poor parents were increased through government programs that mitigated smoking during pregnancy, a gain of health and long-term happiness that is distinct from income. “If you’re trying to measure socio-economic inequality, why do you just look at income inequality?” he asked. “You should certainly look at these results for birthweight inequality, but more generally you would look at the inequality of subjective well being, because it encapsulates all these six factors together. Why feel sorry for someone who is having a low income by choice and living a simple life and has all the necessary supports? You should feel sorrier for the lonely than for the poor; that would be another way of putting it. Interestingly, it’s much easier to do something about the lonely than it is to do something about the poor. And if you do something about the lonely, they’re more likely not to be poor. It may be the most effective thing you can do. We’re gradually trying to twist the inequality debate toward the inequality of well being and to focus on the powerful sources of diminishing that.”

Helliwell emphasized that the social determinants of happiness are much stronger than the material ones, which leads people to overstate the happiness they would derive from some material gain and understate that which would come from social gain.

Dirk Pilat asked about the starting point for building these elements of happiness within a society. Helliwell replied that in some cases the roots of the process goes back centuries, to the foundation of a given culture that supports principles of trust, generosity, and collaboration. He cited the increasing happiness levels of francophone Quebecers over the last 30 years as a powerful Canadian example of what this process looks like over a shorter term, whereby the silent revolution and the concept of “Maîtres chez nous” has eliminated sense of isolation and alienation that had afflicted this group.

He added that “life is lived locally”, meaning that immediate, community-based forces weigh more heavily on the determination of happiness than do broader, national factors. A recent outstanding testament to this was the finding that people affected by the Fukushima earthquake in Japan expressed being happier after this calamity than they were before. “They had rediscovered, reinvented, and recognized the depth of their willingness to collaborate and cooperate in looking after each other,” he said. “They gained enough from that to offset the rest.” Elsewhere, when this kind of social capital is absent, similar disasters have the opposite effect, leading to deteriorating levels of happiness.

Jeffrey Crelinsten asked how Helliwell’s research has affected the philosophy of development, specifically from helping people to helping them help themselves. Helliwell referred specifically to the Barefoot College, a development initiative in India

that targets social needs in a community first and foremost. “It’s a willingness to combine all the actors from very different places on a non-adversarial, non-grasping, non-rule driven way. If the outcomes are good and they’re cooperating with other people, the material parts of it are more or less irrelevent.”