The determinants of a happy life: the foundations

This month's article is the first half of a two-part study into the determinants of what makes a happy life. This is all part of a broader piece of work we are doing at Exploring Happiness, but all will be revealed with respect to this in good time. This article will focus on building some foundations for thinking about this topic, which are vital for understanding what will follow as we aim to construct a framework for assessing how happy our lives are. To simply say that it's complicated would be a cop out but there certainly isn't a 'one-size fits all' approach to solving this problem. We are all different and we will outline in this article how our differences shape our happiness. Related to this, there is of course not one way towards a happy life for all of us, understanding this is necessary for when interpreting what is to follow.

In next month's article we will turn to the evidence currently available related to key components of our lives and how important they are in determining our happiness. The results in this paper will typically be averages based on large sample studies and therefore each result will have distribution of responses around this average. For example, a result may say: an increase in your income of 50% leads to an increase in your happiness on a scale of 0-100, of 10% on average. Of course, it is not 10% for everyone, this is just the average across all the people in the sample. In this month's article we are focusing on understanding more about this distribution, since it is this that shows how we differ.

As a final note before you go any further with this article, we'd like to caveat our messaging by saying this is currently the best version for how we think this topic should be considered. Over time, this messaging may change based upon the evidence that comes available. Basically, if you have any other better ideas, lets us know.

Attentiveness

Attentiveness is a topic that we have already discussed in a different setting when we looked at neuroscience research related to happiness. The message there was that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind and the evidence showed that people can train themselves to be more attentive (i.e. control or regulate their thought patterns). This is good news for what will come next as at Exploring Happiness we subscribe to the view that your happiness is determined by how you allocate your attention.[1] What you think about, tends to drive how you behave. And this in turn, determines your happiness. Using this logic, you can conclude that you will be happiest when you can allocate you attention as best you can. London School of Economics professor, Paul Dolan, contributed towards the research in this area by showing how attention acts as a production process that converts stimuli into happiness.[2] His theory states that the effect of your income on your happiness is determined by not only how much you are paid but also by how much attention you pay towards this.

Figure 1: the production process for happiness

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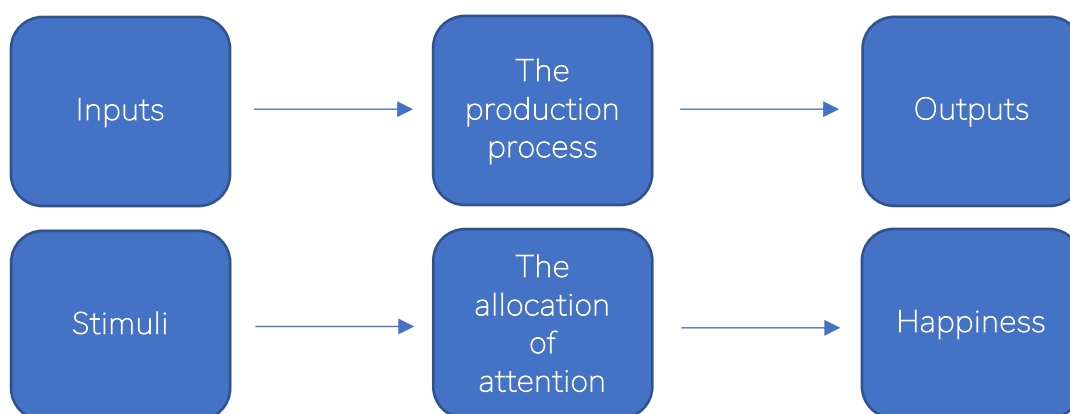
[1] Initial ideas relating to this date back to 1898 when William James published "Does consciousness exist?".
[2] Please see "Happiness by design" for an eloquent explanation of how this all works.

Just to explain how this production process works in a deeper way, please see Figure 1 above. Inputs go into a production process and outputs come out. The inputs into your happiness are a vast range of stimuli aiming to capture your attention. These are then converted into happiness depending on where you choose to allocate your attention. This theory stipulates that the same life event can happen to two very similar people and the effect on their happiness can differ depending on how much attention each individual allocates to this event. I'm sure this example makes some sort of intuitive sense to you, based on your own life experiences.

Preferences

Related to this, all of us have different preferences towards things in our life. Traditional economic theory focuses a lot on preferences and how they differ from one person to another, which informs the decisions we make. The problem is that traditional economics also assumes that we all make rational choices and that we perfectly know all of our preferences towards things. For example, under traditional economic theory if we had a choice between eating a strawberry and a banana and we are asked to choose sequentially between the two, we would assume we would prefer a banana the first four times and then the fifth time we'd prefer to have a strawberry. This could be different for different people, but for this hypothetical person this would be the perfect choice based on their own internally defined preferences. This may all sound a little preposterous to anyone without a background in economics and well, it kind of is. Of course, we don't have complete knowledge over our preferences towards all the choices that we make – but preferences do still matter, and they matter quite a lot.

In the next section we will discuss how you can get a better understanding of your preferences towards things but first let me try to convince you why they matter so much. Each one of us has their own likes and dislikes and it is this, that at least in part, determines how we choose to allocate our attention. Therefore, if it is our allocation of attention that determines our happiness then we need to think about how our different preferences towards things determines how we allocate our attention. By following the same example as mentioned previously, if it is our preference to be a high earner (and we value this greater than perhaps having more leisure time) then we will allocate more attention to the effect of our income on our happiness. And the same could be true for all of the different components that make up our lives such as our family relationships, work fulfilment and our health.

Track how you feel

At the same time, unfortunately, it's a little more complicated than how we have put it across above in practice for several reasons that we will only briefly touch on. Firstly, our attention isn't always allocated consciously, often we find ourselves thinking about things entirely subconsciously and this may or may not be consistent with our true preferences. And secondly, as we mentioned above, we don't actually know what our true preferences are and in actual fact, we may be allocating our attention towards our dislikes rather than our likes in some cases. So, this makes the whole situation a little murkier and more complicated – such is life. We don't have a perfect solution to this problem, but we have what we think is an approximate one, that should hopefully allow each us to make some progress.

So, we know what the goal is: *we want to best understand our preferences towards different elements of our life so then we can make well-informed decisions about how to allocate our attention.* Therefore, on our website summary for this article, we have provided a simple spreadsheet that allows you to track how you feel on a daily basis. Give yourself a score from 0-100[3] each day, and then answer a range of different questions we have provided for you to ask yourself each day so you can start to build a daily log of what you did that day (whether you socialised, exercised, chilled out or studied etc.). Don't feel that you only have to stick to answering the questions we have provided in the spreadsheet, add some of your own questions that you think might be more relevant to your own circumstances. The aim here is that even over a short time, you should start to pick up on patterns. If you are noticeably happier on days where you have X activity, then why not try to do this more often? The aim here is that you should start to

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[3] We provide a simple definition for each score in the spreadsheet, this doesn't matter so much though, it's all about getting your brain ticking over about what was good and what was bad and why.

understand your preferences towards things a little better and therefore you can look to allocate your attention in a way that is consistent with this.

Balancing different forms of a happy lives

Before leaving you to get stuck into this new tool that we hope will be your ticket to a happier life we want to briefly touch on the different forms of happy lives. This should hopefully help you to understand that we can all lead equally happy lives but in completely different ways. There are many different theories on this topic, positive psychologist – Martin Seligman, is one of the most famous with his views on the 'good life, the pleasant life and the meaningful life'. The 'pleasant life' is one full of positive emotions and raw feelings. This is partly a heritable trait but also your life experiences can impact whether you fit into this category. The 'good life' is related to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's famous psychological concept of 'flow' – a highly focused mental state. A person that is capable of engaging in 'flow' regularly is one that participates often in activities that require the perfect balance between a high level of skill and a high level of challenge. Professional athletes are one of the best examples of people that are highly capable of 'flow'. This feeling can increase your happiness rapidly and is a very different form of pleasure since during 'flow' you don't feel anything because you are entirely absorbed in what you are doing. Finally, the 'meaningful life' relates to contributing towards something that is bigger than yourself. Using your strengths and skills to benefit others is a good example of this.

The aforementioned LSE Economist, Paul Dolan, has a theory that is analogous to this but perhaps a little easier to understand in the context of your daily life. This theory, put simply, is about the balance between purpose and pleasure in our daily activities. Some activities are highly pleasurable, such as going for a drink with some friends or watching your favourite television series on Netflix. Other activities feel more purposeful, such as doing a favour for one of your friends or bringing up your own children. It is important to consider where different activities in your life sit in this context. This theory can help to rationalise those that are hard-workers that may be seen to not be engaging in activities to boost their happiness. Not all activities need to be incredibly fun in order for you to be happier, often they can be a little painful, but if they increase your feeling of meaning and purpose then they will often increase your level of happiness too.

Figure 2: A simple example of Dolan's Pleasure-Purpose Principle
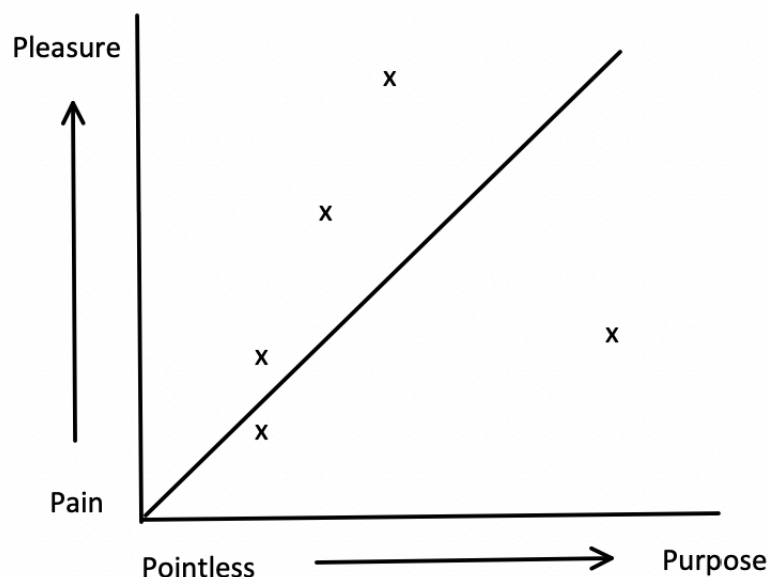
Consider the different forms of happy lives as you track your daily happiness, for most people it's about managing the trade-off between pleasure and purpose to gauge the right balance. And to add a final spanner in the works before we finish, we should mention that your preferences will change over time. This will mean as you start to make more informed decisions based upon a better understanding of your likes and dislikes, you will need to ensure that these choices remain consistent with your current objectives as your circumstances change. Good luck.

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