

Happiness: A Path towards Sustainable Development?

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Abstract

Being environmentally responsible is traditionally viewed as a sacrifice of personal happiness in order to do something good for the world. However, recent studies suggest the opposite; committing to an environmentally responsible behavior (ERB), when intrinsically motivated, leads to an increase in well-being of the individual involved. Environmentalists sometimes employ financial incentives or coercion to spur individuals to be eco-friendly. These methods are not effective because they only lead to transient change. On the other hand, when individuals change behavior as a result of an internal sense of responsibility and connectedness, the change lasts longer than if it were a result of external incentives. Furthermore, individuals derive a sense of satisfaction from such a behavior change as well. Therefore, the message sent by environmentalists should be that ERB increases the well-being of both the individuals and the planet. Research that investigates the relationship between environmental sustainability and happiness is still in its early stages, but the correlation between personal happiness and environmental sustainability has already led to new lifestyle and policy alternatives, including the Voluntary Simplicity movement and Gross National Happiness policy in Bhutan. This paper explores the available literature on this interdisciplinary field of study, and highlights some alternatives to the current economic growth paradigm. Research has shown that a world in which both the environment and citizens are well is possible, but the misunderstanding that economic growth always increases happiness needs to be corrected. Current societal values will need to shift in order to enhance our well-being.

Keywords: Sustainability, Happiness, Well-being, Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The current economic paradigm calls for infinite growth and the endless pursuit of wealth while neglecting the ecological damage that results. As the global environmental crisis looms ever larger, we are in dire need of a paradigm shift—one that moves us towards ecological sustainability and social equity while maintaining economic prosperity. Some leaders and change agents, including Bill McKibben, Paul Hawken, Joseph Stiglitz and John De Graaf, are starting to pull together happiness and sustainability—two conventionally distinct fields that were mutually exclusive in the past, igniting a novel interdisciplinary field of research that seeks an alternative path of development that takes into account more than just economic growth or wealth.

Behavior change to reduce one's environmental impact is currently viewed as a personal sacrifice for the greater good. Dr. Michael Berliner, co-chairman of the Objectivist Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights, wrote that "The guiding principle of environmentalism is self-sacrifice: the sacrifice of longer lives, healthier lives, more prosperous lives, more enjoyable lives, i.e., the sacrifice of human lives." (Ayn Rand Institute, 2012) Lunch and Rothman's (1995) study on American public opinions supported this claim; they concluded that their "careful review of public opinion data reveals that Americans are not willing to sacrifice all other values in order to realize an ambitious environmental agenda." Brown and Kasser acknowledged that "as long as environmentally responsible behavior is framed in self-sacrificial terms, individuals will be faced with tough choices on how to act" (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

Recent studies on sustainability and happiness show that intrinsically motivated individuals who choose to be environmentally responsible are happier than those who neglect the

environment (Brown & Kasser, 2005). The sustainability movement has traditionally tended to advocate aggressively for environmental concerns while ignoring the social component. The Brundtland Commission recognized that many people still advocate for sustainability to only be about environmental issues—a viewpoint the Commission called “a grave mistake” (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This trend has to change, for we cannot build a sustainable society with unhappy people. In fact, as Brown and Kasser’s research indicates, if we can create a society where citizens are intrinsically motivated, citizens can become happier by being environmentally responsible. This paper explores existing literature on happiness and sustainability and proposes that the complementary nature of happiness and environmental sustainability should be leveraged as a path towards sustainable development. Happiness should be a central focus of a sustainable society, and this paper aims to integrate past studies in the field to provide supporting arguments for this claim and highlight recent initiatives related to the subject.

The Study of Happiness and Current Findings from Positive Psychology

Positive psychology—a branch of psychology that “aims to achieve a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families and communities” (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000)—was brought into prominence by Martin Seligman in the late 1900s. Since then the field has continued to gain popularity, and with it the development of various indicators to quantify happiness started. The first one is the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, which provides an in-depth and real-time view of Americans’ well-being through the analysis of over a thousand interviews of adults each day for nearly 350 days each year conducted by Gallup and Healthways (Gallup, Inc., 2008). Currently in its fourth year of existence, it has grown to become the largest database of well-being metrics in the United

States and is the most comprehensive study of its kind (Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, 2011)—one that is utilized by many researchers nationwide.

In its relatively young age, positive psychology has already produced intriguing results that challenge the basic belief in our American society that more money always leads to a happier life. Contrary to popular belief, emotional well-being does not rise continuously with income (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Stutz, 2006); there is no correlation between emotional well-being and income beyond an annual income of about \$75,000 in the US. Kahneman also found that on the other side of the spectrum, poverty exacerbates adverse circumstances, i.e. the same negative situation impacts the well-being of people in poverty more so than those who are not (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Apart from the dependence on absolute income—the value of how much money one makes, happiness is also affected by relative income—how much one makes in comparison to others. If one has a rise in income, but others' incomes rise by a higher level, one does not feel happier (Easterlin, 1995). This is true even below the \$75,000 threshold. As GDP of the United States continued to rise since the 1980s, the level of happiness has remained flat (Deutsche Bank Research, 2006)—an effect dubbed the Easterlin Paradox, named after Professor Richard Easterlin who discovered that the happiness of a country as a whole does not rise as the country's income rises (Easterlin, 1974; Easterlin, 2010)¹.

Money is not the only factor that affects happiness; interpersonal relationships play a strong role as well. Layard (2006) found that individuals become happier as they have quality social interaction and become a part of more social circles. Positive psychology researcher

¹ The Easterlin Paradox is not without controversy. It has been hotly debated in the past decade, but Easterlin's latest study in 2010 confirmed his original conclusion.

Christopher Peterson puts it simply: “Relationships matter” (personal communication, December 7, 2011).

Such findings raise many red flags regarding the mainstream materialistic culture and capitalist economy in the United States (US); both are based on wealth creation and the infinite growth paradigm, which have failed to make people happier. Since the 1950s, the rise in average income has not led to an increase in self-reported happiness (Myers, 2000).

Based on aforementioned studies, the society’s modus operandi—particularly the use of GDP as the main indicator of progress—is inadequate in supporting its citizens’ pursuit of happiness. In fact, the United Nations stated in 2011 that “the gross domestic product indicator by nature is not designed to and does not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of people in a country” (United Nations, 2011). I believe that a paradigm shift from one that is based on money to one that is based on maximizing happiness of the people will allow us to have a holistic approach to development that includes more than economic growth.

It is also noteworthy that there is no single definition of happiness or well-being. Terms such as emotional well-being and life evaluation, among many others, have been introduced to capture its different elements. Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton defined emotional well-being as “the emotional quality of an individual’s everyday experience” and life evaluation (or life satisfaction) as the “person’s thoughts about his or her life” (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Both emotional well-being and life evaluation are considered by Kahneman and Deaton to be part of happiness, and I have exercised care in using these terms appropriately. On the other hand, while these emotional well-being and life evaluation are distinct, studies of sustainability and happiness that do not deal with the differences between the two concepts often just speak of happiness as an overarching concept, which is the approach of this paper.

Sustainability and Happiness

Since positive psychology was introduced, there is increasing attention—both in academia and outside it—on well-being of individuals and communities also made its way into the field of environmental stewardship. My exploration had let me to a few researchers who investigated the relationship between happiness and sustainability. Our previous understanding that sustainable behavior is a sacrifice which reduces personal happiness may be a misconception (Brown & Kasser, 2005). If people can be environmentally responsible and derive happiness from doing so, this cross-disciplinary study may have far-reaching ramifications on how we advocate for a sustainable society; the message that activists promote will completely shift—from one based on sacrifice to one based on lasting happiness.

Solutions to the global climate crisis have often been thought about within an economic framework, not a social framework—how people will respond or be impacted by the changes. Economic incentives, and to a lesser extent coercion techniques, are often used to induce behavior change. Raymond De Young claimed that these methods “have a transient effect... and [the behavior change] is quickly terminated” (De Young, 1993). De Young (1993) argued that behavior change techniques should be decided based on a few criteria, including:

- **Reliability:** How well a technique is able to affect an individual’s behavior.
- **Non-particularism:** Whether the technique can be designed for universal application or must be designed uniquely for each individual.
- **Generality:** How well the target behavior spills over to related untargeted eco-friendly behaviors.
- **Durability:** Whether the behavior change is maintained without repeated intervention.

Material incentives lead to a quick change in behavior, but this is a transient effect that is particular and not durable (De Young, 1993). Other scholars have also noted that extrinsic motivation can result only in minimum compliance (Katz & Kahn, 1978), and that activities that

were appealing at first can lose its appeal when tied to extrinsic rewards (Lepper & Greene, 1978).

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is shown to have a strong relationship with conservation behavior (De Young, 1985-86), which implies that individuals derive personal satisfaction from environmentally responsible behavior (ERB). De Young concluded that offering financial incentives is neither the only way to encourage behavior change nor the best. A better approach would be to use the money “to enhance people’s discovery of the satisfactions which can be derived from conservation activities.” (De Young, 1985-86).

These findings are further enhanced by the work of Timothy Kasser—a pioneer in bringing sustainability and happiness together—who suggests that a sustainable and happy society is possible. Brown and Kasser found that people who have an intrinsic value orientation report higher levels of happiness and ERB (Brown & Kasser, 2005). On the flipside, people who believe money is very important are less happy than those who do not believe so (Diener & Oishi, 2000). These studies suggest that ERB should no longer be thought of as a sacrifice; ERB enhances the well-being of both the planet and people. For example, one can offer an individual a monetary incentive for “sacrificing” the eating of meat, or one can appeal to the individual’s intrinsic sense of responsibility and meaning in doing his or her part to help the world. Brown and Kasser’s research points to a “mutually beneficial relation between personal and planetary well-being.” Hence, ERB—if approached through intrinsic means—can actually lead to an increase in life satisfaction (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

As Myers and Diener found, the most important source of life satisfaction is nonmaterial in nature (Myers & Diener, 1995). Therefore, I believe that a new interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the economic paradigm and incorporates both sustainability and happiness warrants

consideration. What is most promising about the combination of happiness and sustainability is that it “has the capacity to attract the attention of individuals who might never consider themselves to be environmentalists or who feel weary of being prodded toward environmentally friendly behavior through guilt” (O'Brien, 2010).

The Status Quo

The majority of the aforementioned studies overwhelmingly suggest that the current economic model of pursuing increases in GDP is outdated. This pursuit is largely induced by our economic system based on the capitalist model. Kasser has written extensively on the environmental and social costs of the American capitalism. Capitalism is driven by self-interest, financial profit and competition. Capitalism becomes “a system of beliefs... that encourage, regulate, and direct human motivations and values.” (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). Individuals subjected to this system then “internalize” the values of capitalism (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007), and the effect is astonishing. 70% of US adolescents believe that financial success is a very important aim in life (Myers, 2000), and a similar percentage believes that Americans are self-interested and do not care about those in need (Wuthnow, 1995). The values brought about by capitalism are at odds with other aims, such as concern for the world and close relationships (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). Many acknowledge the shortcomings of capitalism, but it is still in place today because sticking to the status quo is the easiest option (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1998). Kasser believes that “Claims that “things must be the way they are” and that “there are no better options than the present system” ... [lead people] not to ask probing questions about the system and not seek out alternative lifestyles that are less competitive and consumeristic” (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). Our capitalist economy needs to be reformed to a new model that aligns with values and needs of a sustainable

society, including intrinsic motivation, less focus on material goods and financial success as well as concern for relationships and the world.

Paths to a Sustainable Future

Many concepts have been proposed as alternative paths to capitalism. This section highlights some concepts that I have found in my literature search.

Sustainable Happiness

Catherine O'Brien, assistant professor of education at Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, Canada, coined the term sustainable happiness to represent "happiness that contributes to individual, community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations" (O'Brien, 2010). O'Brien believes that positive psychology theories and research should be applied to urban planning and policymaking (O'Brien, 2005). For example, she called for the transportation system to be overhauled. Transportation should not be just about moving from one place to another but about enjoying the scenery, adventure and companion (O'Brien, 2005). She also wrote about the need for the education sector—traditionally very conservative—to pay attention to sustainable happiness. Teacher education needs to be reoriented to sustainability and more emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that happiness has little to do with wealth and overconsumption (O'Brien, 2010). Combining sustainability and happiness into one phrase, O'Brien intends for this concept to fuel further integration of both concepts.

Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary Simplicity (VS)—a movement consisting of people who desire to lead a simpler life less attached to money and material—became popular after a book with its own name was published in 1981 by Duane Elgin. The movement advocates for a balanced approach in life that embraces the sentiment echoed by Richard Gregg: "singleness of purpose, sincerity

and honesty within, as well as the avoidance of... many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life.” (Elgin, 2010). Many voluntary simplifiers—VSers in short—prioritize personal growth, spiritual development and ecological well-being as their main concerns (Kasser, 2010). VSers report higher level of happiness and live in ways that reduce their environmental footprints when compared to the mainstream group (Brown & Kasser, 2005). Brown and Kasser developed a model that suggested that the results were partially explained by the difference in value systems; VSer’s value system is oriented towards intrinsic goals, while the mainstream Americans’ is oriented towards extrinsic and materialistic goals (Brown & Kasser, 2005). The characteristics of the VS movement—such as frugal consumption, practicing mindfulness and focus on relationships—are consistent with those of sustainable livelihood, and this movement deserves further attention.

Time Affluence

In my opinion, one of the most fascinating concepts that arose out of the dissatisfaction of the current societal conditions is time affluence. As many of us strive for material affluence, we work longer hours in an attempt to earn extra cash. This results in the experience of “time poverty”. Time poverty, along with overwork, is correlated with lower happiness and more environmental damage (de Graaf, 2003). In fact, reports that life is “too hectic” or “too busy” predicted lowered life satisfaction (Kasser & Brown, 2003). Time poverty prevents individuals from pursuing enjoyable activities, such as their hobbies or social gatherings. Furthermore, it often prohibits slower—and more sustainable—modes of transportation (walking, biking or public transportation) or time to prepare healthy meals (Kasser, 2009). Consequently, countries whose population worked fewer hours had lower ecological footprints (Hayden & Shandra, 2009).

The US is one of the few nations in the world yet to have mandates of minimum paid vacation or maternity leave (Kasser, 2010). A different message needs to be broadcasted by the government if its goal really is to serve the people.

These three concepts are important because they signify the potential shift—in the right direction—in the way our society operates. They are three ways we can create a happy and sustainable society: fostering conversation about the relationship between sustainability and happiness, promoting a less materialistic culture and helping individuals allocate enough time to do things that make them happy. These three ideas can serve as starting points for the conversation about sustainability and happiness as they offer some policy options and ideas on how environmental sustainability and personal happiness can be achieved.

Grassroots Activism

In 2010, John de Graaf and Laura Musikanski decided to take matters into their own hands and officially launched a nonprofit called The Happiness Initiative (HI). Originally based in Seattle, WA and reaching out nationwide, HI aims to build “a new quality of life movement based upon measures of civic success and prosperity that go beyond Gross Domestic Product” (The Happiness Initiative, 2011). Since its inauguration, many passionate citizens in counties and college campuses have started their own initiatives in their communities, and many more are interested in doing so.

The Happiness Initiative is but one example of the grassroots activism that is calling for people to be more mindful of their own well-being and that of the planet. As the sustainability and happiness movement is still in its infancy, such activism is crucial in spreading the awareness of the idea that individuals can be environmentally responsible and happy at the same

time. If more people start to believe in the idea, this will also put pressure on governing bodies to add indicators of happiness. This is especially true considering that moving towards an environmentally and socially healthy future may require more than just a behavior change; it may require a shift in values.

Towards a Culture of Sustainability and Happiness

A daunting challenge facing the sustainability and happiness movement is that people's values differ. To create a sustainable future, governments, nonprofits and other entities must be able to move people deeply enough to shift their values and aspirations towards those that are conducive to sustainability and happiness. In Schwartz's circumplex model of values (Schwartz, 1992), power and achievement—two features of capitalism—lie opposite universalism and benevolence, two values that are associated with concern for the greater good (Kasser, 2011). In fact, Grouzet et al.'s study of college students showed that desire for financial success is diametrical to community-feeling aspirations (Grouzet, et al., 2005). In the meantime, capitalistic values undermine people's concern for a sense of connectedness with other humans and life paths that make them feel worthy and autonomous (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). So, according to this research, the more an individual concerns himself or herself with materialistic goals like power, achievement and financial success, the less likely he or she is going to act in a way that enhances the well-being of future generations (Kasser, 2011).

Beyond the values of individuals, differences in culture-level values—the aggregate set of values that defines a group—also play a role in affecting the future of the society. Schwartz's culture-level model of values (Schwartz, 1999) suggests that cultural values that promote self-interest are in conflict with values that promote concern for future generations. Hierarchy and

mastery values are extrinsically oriented and focus on wealth and power creation, while egalitarianism and harmony promote equality, distribution of power and appreciation of the world. Kasser found that the more a nation values Hierarchy and Mastery and the less it values Egalitarianism and Harmony, the lower the children's well-being is in the nation and the more CO₂ the nation emits (Kasser, 2011).

Countries have different cultural values on the macro level and, on the micro scale, further differences among individuals within each country. The fact that there are differences both between and within countries is the major challenge of building a new culture or moving an existing one in a new direction, but this is a challenge that needs to be tackled. A shift towards egalitarianism and harmony values is needed in order to create a future that is environmentally sustainable and supports citizens' pursuit of happiness. We are facing a crisis of values, and like Kasser said, in order to enhance sustainability, we need to "remove the root causes of self-enhancing, materialistic values [and] encourage alternative values that oppose the self-enhancing, materialistic values and that promote ecological sustainability" (Kasser, 2010). Our current lifestyle is simply not sustainable, ecologically and socially. We need to find "greater harmony between our internal and external landscapes," (O'Brien, 2005) such that our external experiences lead to internal joy and fulfillment. Only when we are environmentally responsible and derive satisfaction from being so can we claim that our society is truly sustainable.

Policy Options: Measuring What Matters

While the shift towards a culture of sustainability is indeed a monumental challenge, twelve countries have already started this process—with positive reception from their citizens.

This section briefly highlights the effort in Bhutan—the first country to do so, and discusses the overall implications for the future.

One of the first countries to start measuring happiness is a tiny nation in the Himalayas called Bhutan. HM the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck proclaimed in 1972—incidentally, he was sixteen years old at the time—that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product” (Gross National Happiness USA, Inc.). Guided by Buddhist ethics, Gross National Happiness (GNH) emerged as both a philosophy and an indicator to promote both human development and environmental conservation (Zurick, 2006). However, Bhutan and GNH still face significant challenges. As Bhutan opens up to the rest of the world, it is walking the fine line of maintaining its cultural heritage and environmental quality while welcoming the technology and opportunities from globalization (Zurick, 2006). Another important consideration is the cultural homogeneity in Bhutan. The Citizenship Act, which some claim was implemented to create a single national identity, resulted in the eviction of more than 1000,000 ethnic Nepalis (Hutt, 2003). This raises the concern of whether and how concepts like GNH can be applied to diverse settings such as the United States and Europe.

Since its conception in 1972, GNH has sparked worldwide debate on the measures of progress and prompted many organizations and countries to seriously consider including well-being indicators in their own progress reports. In 2011, Christian Kroll published a paper (Kroll, 2011a) that contains a sizeable list of countries attempting to measure well-being. Apart from Bhutan, countries including the UK, US, Germany, Italy, France, Australia, Spain, Netherlands, China, India, and Canada are pursuing comprehensive measurements of well-being through a myriad of ways including administering new surveys, hosting roundtables to foster community engagement, producing well-being reports, developing a single index or set of indicators, and

creating happiness scorecards. Through his research, Kroll noticed that many countries are now in agreement that “existing measures of progress in societies, above all GDP, are no longer adequate.” Although there are different approaches (a single happiness index vs. a dashboard of indicators being one example), key elements such as involving the public and utilizing the indicators to evaluate policies are vital in enhancing the well-being of the country. In fact, using well-being indicators is a proposal that may change the how politics work around the world. The release of indicators could require politicians to be accountable to their policy ideas, who will have to defend their policies with evidence rather than opinions (Kroll, 2011b). Furthermore, pursuing happiness is a universal goal and tends to invite bipartisan cooperation instead of the quotidian stalemate and political bickering that is common in the present day. These will result in higher civic participation and policies that are geared towards the betterment of people’s lives.

Exciting challenges lie ahead for this new movement. The next few decades will certainly be interesting as more countries begin to roll out their well-being initiatives and those currently with programs in place start to release their findings. To borrow from Richard Layard (2006), great societies should be judged by the happiness of their people rather than how wealthy they are. This is indeed becoming a reality.

Conclusion

The author is encouraged by the amount of research and initiatives on sustainability and happiness that occurred in recent years. As shown in this paper, our current mindset and way of life contain misconstrued notions of happiness and success. We cannot continue to operate using the capitalist model and still expect to be environmentally sustainable. Fortunately, alternatives already exist; they need close examination. As nonprofits like the Happiness Initiative advocate for sustainable happiness and countries like Bhutan and Canada attempt to create policies to

account for the welfare of their people, we will continue to learn how best to attain sustainability and happiness concurrently. United Nation's (2011) recent resolution that said "the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal" and invites its members to "pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of... well-being in development" is a positive sign that the shift is forthcoming. Upcoming research focusing on further integrating environmental sustainability and happiness will be valuable in providing additional momentum for the movement. Along with the advances in research, there is no better time for individuals to act. The time to call for happiness to be a primary concern of life is now. Sustainable development—one that neglects neither the environment nor the well-being of the people—can be achieved through heightened and active consideration of happiness.

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