

**Crossing Channels**

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by **Rory Cellan-Jones**

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*Episode VII*  
**IS IT THE GOVERNMENT'S JOB TO MAKE US HAPPY?**

With  
**Anna Alexandrova**  
 (Bennett Institute for Public Policy)  
**Jonathan Stieglitz**  
 (Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse)

# Is it the government's job to make us happy?

## SPEAKERS

Rory Cellan-Jones, Professor Anna Alexandrova, and Dr Jonathan Stieglitz,

### Rory Cellan-Jones 00:00

Hello and welcome to crossing channels a podcast collaboration between the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. This series is all about using the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore some of the many complex challenges facing our societies. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and today's episode asks the question, is it the government's job to make us happy? We're going to look at why some people think we need policies for happiness, and what those might mean. To explore these issues today, we have Jonathan Stieglitz from the IAST. Jonathan remind us of your main research interests.

### Jonathan Stieglitz 00:40

Hi, I'm an evolutionary anthropologist, and I study health and wellbeing both objective and subjective indicators of wellbeing. In small scale rural subsistence societies, with a particular focus in the Bolivian Amazon among two groups called the Tsimane and Mosesten.

### Rory Cellan-Jones 00:56

And from the Bennett Institute, we have Anna Alexandrova. And what do you focus on?

**Anna Alexandrova** 01:01

I'm a philosopher of science, and I study how scientists use formal models and indicators to study phenomena that are far more complex and far more morally significant than any model or an indicator can capture.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 01:17

Great. So we're going to have a stimulating discussion about happiness. And I'm going to start with a very basic question, how do we define happiness? How does it fit in with the concept of wellbeing? And how do we put a value on both Anna, kick us off?

**Anna Alexandrova** 01:33

The first thing to say is that historically and culturally, both of these words are very contestable and defined in very different ways. So to come out and say, this is what happiness means and this is how it relates to wellbeing is always a step you take to erase other definitions. So what I'm going to say, though, is that in the present context in which governments are considering making happiness, their object of work, in which they're bringing social scientists to provide evidence about it, this context forces a very specific definition of happiness as a psychological state that is largely positive rather than negative and wellbeing perhaps a wider state of life. That includes happiness, but perhaps also other goals, such as being a member of a healthy community, having good physical and mental health and other things.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 02:38

Jonathan, what's your definition?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 02:40

I would very much agree with Anna I would characterise happiness as an emotional state. It's an emotion that's recognised cross culturally, and in some broad sense, I think it can be experienced in really similar ways. Regardless of cultural and other differences. Happiness happens when we feel really good, when we feel like things are going well. And one can also think about happiness as sort of one end of a continuum of broader psychological wellbeing, with sadness or emotions characterised by negative valence on the other end, you know, when we talk about wellbeing, it's not just a synonym for happiness, but it includes things like one's comfort, prosperity, it's really a broader construct with various sub-components.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 03:24

Can we have some sort of scale of measurement of it? It's kind of cliché to ask people on a scale of one to 10, how happy are you? But can we as societies actually come up with any kind of objective measurement of it?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 03:36

Well, the very scale that you mentioned, a variant of it is actually used. It's called Cantrell's ladder and it can be used for things like life satisfaction, or other questions where one is asked us basically point

their position on the ladder. And it could be sort of in absolute terms, how happy are you, but it could also be relative to other individuals. So we're on the ladder would you place yourself compared to others in your peer group. But I would also say, unfortunately, there's no biomarker of happiness. We rely on things like neurotransmitters, perhaps dopamine to understand feelings of satisfaction, but there is no single biomarker, some objective measure. And so we're forced mainly to rely on self-reported and subjective measures using, as you said, Rory, scales or surveys. And so in these scales or surveys, items can focus on positively worded questions. Are you happy? Are you having fun smiling, laughing? Or the items can focus on sort of negative valence? Are you sad? Are you unhappy? When you are sad, can you snap out of it? And other types of questions like this. You know, and of course, these questions can be modified in some ways. Again, you can compare oneself to your peers, but you can also ask more open ended questions and not force people to respond on some scale of one to 10 Perhaps to get their own sense of what is actually inside there inside their minds. And other measures include trying to solicit reports from other people by asking friends or family members, there are some novel methods that are increasingly being used called experience sampling where essentially researchers can ping people on their cell phones systematically throughout the course of a day asking them specific questions at that point in the day.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 05:16

Anna, have you seen any objective measures as it were of happiness that you would respect?

**Anna Alexandrova** 05:22

Let me add to Jonathan's excellent summary, that measurability of happiness has been an ambition since the 18th century Scottish moral philosophers and English moral philosophers of the Enlightenment in the past 30 years, and specifically, with the rise of happiness economics and positive psychology, we have seen a proliferation of very many different, self-reported largely, measures of happiness and surrounding concepts. The tricky thing has been not just figuring out what is the right question to ask people, when you want to know how well they're doing. The tricky thing has been showing that when you ask this question, the sort of data you receive, that what you've got here is a genuine indicator that picks out both people that are doing very well, people that are doing badly as likely to pick out one as the other, covering the full spectrum, and so on. So these requirements of psychometric validity, are the requirements that any measure of happiness needs to demonstrate, to say that the question they're asking people is not just plausible and doesn't just sound right, and it doesn't just feel like we're asking them to talk about happiness, but also is genuinely valid. And that's perhaps what you mean, when you ask, is it an objective measure? Now, whether or not these self-reports obey those principles is a whole other question. Exactly how stringent of a requirement we're going to be setting there is a matter of great debate. And, you know, if you asked me for my opinion, have I seen an objective measure of happiness? No, I will answer if you asked me for perhaps a slightly weaker question. Have I seen usable indicators that people do interesting things with? I'm going to answer yes.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 07:32

So which brings us on to Why should making us happier be a task for government? And actually, is it I think you said that it is, is quite an old idea in the pursuit of happiness has been, in some ways built into

the mission of governments for many centuries. But there is seems to be a new focus on it now. Anna, why should we expect governments to do that? And and is that a realistic expectation?

**Anna Alexandrova** 07:57

So let's distinguish between two really extreme views. One is, it is not government's job to take care of people's happiness, it is government's job, to ensure a certain minimal set of freedoms and securities and then after that, leave people alone. That's one extreme. The other extreme you have it is government's job to create the environment and spend their resources in a way that maximally raises people's positive evaluations of their lives. Now, between these two extremes, there are many different options. And I think governments would be negligent and wrong to ignore the wellbeing and even the happiness of their constituents. But that does not follow that it is government's business to maximise their happiness and wellbeing.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 08:53

Jonathan, what's your view?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 08:54

Well, I would say that happier people work more efficiently, they're more likely to help others and their societies relative to sadder people. And that sustained happiness doesn't necessarily lead to engaging in more selfish or frivolous pursuits, as many people think, and that governments have incentives to try to keep people happy for those reasons, and for other reasons. There plenty of historical and modern examples of those people who aren't particularly happy and mobilising and trying to actually weaken government, and make it work sort of less well for people And so sure, I think we should recognise that individuals have some responsibility for their own wellbeing, you know, living healthy lifestyles, eating well getting plenty of physical activity, but at the same time, I think it's really hard to achieve sustained happiness. And there are actually some good evolutionary reasons for this. You know, our bodies for example, we can store energy and fat we can survive for days without food, but we bodies cannot really store happiness and satisfaction, it would be a disaster, I think if we could, and so far as we wouldn't necessarily be motivated to pursue pending needs.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 10:47

So Anna, we've established that there are difficulties there ambiguities with measuring happiness, wellbeing governments over certainly recent decades, have seen their objective as improving something that can be measured: GDP, economic growth Is there any point in them trying to improve something that they can't really measure?

**Anna Alexandrova** 11:09

At some point, GDP didn't seem measurable either. It was made measurable, as many historians of GDP pointed out, the long process of construction of this object, national income, national wealth took a great deal of work. When we say, you know, happiness is not measurable, the implication is not that other things are perfectly measurable. No, the implication is that it takes a great deal of work to stabilize, construct, and just in general, put your indicators to work in such a way as they reliably regulate the work of any large bodied corporation or government. I think happiness and wellbeing is currently in this journey of people trying to settle on some set of indicators, or one people trying to

improve the existing ones that Jonathan's already mentioned in that process of creating a measurable indicator, I think we are well in the way, if we ever thought that government's job is to improve our lives, there is absolutely no reason to think that we are able to have that with GDP, but not with happiness.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 12:31

Jonathan, you wanted to come in?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 12:32

Yeah. So I would say that, you know, we can obviously improve happiness and wellbeing without measuring it necessarily. And that doesn't mean that we shouldn't measure it. The other thing I would say is that wellbeing because it's a broad construct, I think we need really diverse measures in those population representative samples to help evaluate the efficacy of government initiatives, perhaps correct them when they don't deliver what they intend to deliver. Some initiatives may be very well intentioned, but can have unforeseen negative consequences. So for example, you know, making vaccine access conditional on having some paperwork, well, if you know, folks don't have paperwork, and if some subgroups are less likely to have access to those resources, then these initiatives just exacerbate inequalities. But we wouldn't necessarily know this without this sort of population level, repeated monitoring of happiness and diverse measures of wellbeing at the national level.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 14:21

What do we know? Anna, I mean, this, this idea has been in the ether for last 2030 years. What do we know about policy interventions, solutions that work or don't work? Have we got any evidence of success by governments in pushing through happiness policies?

**Anna Alexandrova** 14:38

Well, your question is about interventions that governments should undertake. And there is a big variety of things they could be doing. So there is a field called positive psychology that study is largely interventions on a very individual level. Does it work to teach children mindfulness meditation, does it work to encourage people to exercise gratefulness for what they have, does it work to help them address mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and so on. And then there is, of course, much larger and more ambitious questions such as what environments and what policies bring about good ratings on whatever indicator that you're going to settle on. So on this macro level, I suppose the main result that I think economists, and sociologists have been studying now for a long time is the very deleterious effect of unemployment on happiness. When you lose your position, as an employee with a clear identity, you lose both your independence and your projects and you're standing, you lose your identity, and you'll lose your livelihood. That is something that is very, very hard to replace. So at the macro level, perhaps the main happiness policy that people have discussed is promotion of employment, but in between those policies, and very, very micro things that individuals can do, such as buy yourself a mindfulness app and promote your peacefulness on a daily basis, there is a whole range of other potential policies that smaller scales, organisations can do, such as access to green space, promotion of good culture, in an organisation and so on. And when you say, do we have evidence, what do we know? Well, we have a lot of evidence on you know, it has worked here to that extent it will, it has worked thereto some extent, do we have evidence that we are sure will generalise across communities such that you take one happiness policy in one community transplanted into

another, and it would have the same effect? No, we do not have such evidence. But it might be too high of a standard to hold evidence based policy to something like that. We've got a lot of valuable evidence here and there, and we've got a lot of constant exploration.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 17:24

Let's look at how drivers of happiness may differ between different countries and different societies. Jonathan, your research focuses on small scale societies. Can we learn anything from them? Oh, absolutely.

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 17:36

Oh absolutely, and I would say, indeed, most wellbeing research is conducted in high income countries with more capacity to invest in research, but basically cross culturally, I think we see surprising, the robust similarities in both some of the risk and the protective factors affecting wellbeing. I think most of this research is done in the domains of health, poor health, whether it's disability and inflammation, poor health, you know, robustly reduces psychological other forms of wellbeing across diverse populations, as does resource insecurity, social conflict, social isolation. And of course, the converse people with more security, less conflict feel better. And so what do we do see some of the variation, I think, between societies, much of this is coming from differences in lifestyles, norms, and institutions that affect some of these interrelationships between health, productivity, and sociality. For example, government policies like federally mandated sick leave may help buffer some of the negative consequences of illness and injury as can things like disability insurance. But of course, we don't have some of these policies in various countries and this may have big effects on on happiness and wellbeing. Where I work in, in Bolivia, Tsimane and the Mosesten their lifestyle is such that people are actively working very, very hard doing rigorous, physically intensive subsistence work to produce their own food and share food with others. And so there really is no such thing as retirement. Tsimane, Mosesten, they don't really retire, they work until they, they can't work anymore, nor do they have retirement savings to rely on. But they live in these sort of extended family clusters. And so this coresidence, and the fact that much of their work, I think by nature is social, that they'll share labour, grandparents will babysit grandchildren, for example, it really does mean I think that there's less risk for social isolation in these small scale rural communities. And we know of course, social isolation is a major predictor of mortality, depression, and other various threats to wellbeing.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 19:46

Is it a romantic myth that places where modernity he has yet to arrive?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 20:01

Well, I think it's a bit misguided to characterise these types of groups like the Tsimane, or Mosesten as isolated from from modernity. They've been affected by broader social influences for hundreds, if not 1000s of years. Tsimane, Mosesten are generally quite welcoming, happy for some of the reasons that I mentioned. But at the same time, they're among the poorest, poorest citizens of Bolivia, which itself is, you know, not among the wealthiest countries in South America. And then so Tsimani, they lack very basic services that are often provided by governments. So most villages lack electricity, most villages lack running water. And so when we asked, you know, people, what are some of their most urgent needs, cleaning up the water supply, so investing in clean water wells, providing communities with little

medical kits to treat just sort of injuries, falling out of trees, and walking barefoot, for much of the time that you're, it's quite easy to cut up your your feet, and so having antibiotic ointment, so these are really basic needs that people are constantly asking for, and unfortunately, municipal governments, national governments are quite far from reaching these types of rural communities.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 22:56

And, Jonathan, if any of these policies are to be successful, do they need to be not focused so broadly, but on people with particular problems? For instance, there's a kind of epidemic of mental health problems in many Western societies now, and possibly also, in the smallest societies that you look at? Is that where we should be looking for these policies to make an impact?

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 23:20

So I might rephrase your question slightly and ask, to what extent are that some of the mental health problems that we see a product of societies we live in today, and I think this is extremely hard to know, for many reasons. Clinically, diagnostic criteria, methods of detection change over time, for focusing on subclinical variation in psychological wellbeing indicators, methods vary across studies and over time, there's of course changes in lifespan over time. Indicators of wellbeing don't necessarily fossilise, making it hard for us to know experiences from past populations. However, you know, some have suggested that mental health problems like clinical depression are just one of the larger set of health problems that have sometimes been referred to as diseases of modernity or diseases of civilization, that include things like cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, many of which co-occur with depression, and that many of the driving factors underlying these diseases have to do with urbanised lifestyles and environments. So having obesogenic diets, and high levels of economic inequality, and associated psychosocial stress and lots of residential mobility and isolation from family, sitting alone at dinner, staring at our screens, things like drug addiction, changing family composition, including the rise of single parent households, particularly in the US. And so I think one of the commonalities across many of these features as is that in some way, they really do represent radical departures from lifestyles that were more common in our hunting and gathering past.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 24:56

Does that show that the smaller scale societies don't have those same problems or what.

**Jonathan Stieglitz** 25:03

Right. And so, you know for focusing on any one of these potential risk factors, something like obesogenic diets. Obesity is extremely rare among the Tsimane, hypertension is quite rare. Diabetes is rare. There's, you know, very little cardiovascular disease, you know, and of course, because of this sort of communal living and co-residence, coupled with their high fertility, the average post reproductive woman has nine children. And so you're really constantly surrounded by people. And you are constantly both being helped by others. And you are constantly helping other people at really every phase of the life course. And in so many ways, you know, in our modern urbanised lifestyles, we've departed from these basic social, environmental conditions. You know, not much research exists in many of these more remote smaller scale societies. But I think work in these societies is extremely valuable to serve, you know, as some sort of baseline to determine whether some of the mental health

problems we observe may indeed be a byproduct of some of these features of modern urbanised lifestyles.

**Rory Cellan-Jones 26:11**

Anna what's your take on that?

**Anna Alexandrova 26:13**

So when we talk about ways of addressing pervasive and debilitating mental health conditions, especially depression and anxiety, we sometimes try to examine what would be the macro factors, as you said, wellbeing policies that could address that, that is one approach to try and figure out how is it that we modify our environment, say, of a modern city or a modern workplace or an educational place, that would make it less depression, or anxiety inducing. But a lot of people think that the level of our knowledge on these environmental causes of mental illness is really quite poor, when mentally ill people need help, they need help that is the best available help coming from public health and psychiatry. And that is access to therapy, access to medication and access to time off in order to deal with these problems, and being able to get hold on to all of these resources without a lot of wealth and time being presupposed. And, you know, when we talk about whether wellbeing policy should also be in the business of improving people's mental health, I worry that we are not using the best available means to us. And we're trying instead, to figure out assuming that the opposite of wellbeing is just misery, and misery is just mental health, which we need to just promote people's wellbeing in order to promote their mental health that does not follow and there isn't actually a great deal of data to support that approach, rather than just opening up and properly funding normal mental health interventions.

**Rory Cellan-Jones 30:48**

Anna isn't the basic truth, we come back to economics, it's having more money that makes people more happy, and therefore policies to increase happiness would presumably be need to be biased towards less inequality. Well,

**Anna Alexandrova 31:07**

Well, people with low income is an incredibly diverse group. And some of the people on low income are suffering, because they can't enter into the modern workplace and get on the property ladder and become members of healthy communities. Others suffer because of even greater interaction between poverty and mental health when the two compound and so on. But in my own research with a UK charity Turn2Us that specialises in helping people that come on sudden financial problems, we have found through long series of qualitative interviews, that there is no one factor that people need there. So it's not that they need to kind of extra injection of cash at the expense of at all and in order to get to a better state of happiness. What they emphasise is they need to go on a personal journey. And to discover what is it that is going on in their lives today, they need to escape abusive relationships, they need to escape very oppressive social environments, or they need to get rid of a certain assumptions that they needed to be in this profession and not that profession. So that kind of process of figuring out who you are, you need space for that process, you need an opportunity to take risks, and you need definitely an ability not to have to focus on the bare necessities. Then coming out of that research, the main message is that people do need space to explore whether they are on low income for whatever reason they end up there.

**Rory Cellan-Jones 37:11**

Well, we've come up with various recipes for happiness, but we I think, have concluded that it's, it's a long journey, and we're still not all that far down the path to deciding how to create it. Thanks to our expert panel, Jonathan Stieglitz from the IAST and Anna Alexandrova from the Bennett Institute. Let us know what you think of this seventh edition of crossing channels. You can contact us via Twitter. The Bennett Institute is @BennettInst, the Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse, and I am @Ruskin147. If you enjoyed this programme, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels episodes, notably, our recent addition with the Kiev School of Economics, talking about the Ukraine invasion. And please join us next month when we'll have a new edition, looking at whether democratic political leaders will ever live up to their expectations or if they're always destined to disappoint their populations.