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William Davies on the Happiness Industry

Nigel Warburton: *There is a wealth of new research on how, and why, we experience pleasure, much of it coming from brain studies. This is feeding into decisions made by people in advertising, in business generally, and even in government. But what's going on here? What understanding of the social is implied by this focus on individual pleasure? Will Davies, of Goldsmiths, University of London, has been looking at the ways in which this happiness research is being used.*

David Edmonds: *Will Davies, welcome to Social Science Bites.*

Will Davies: Thank you.

David Edmonds: *The topic we are talking about today is the happiness industry. Perhaps we should start by defining a couple of crucial terms in that. How should we understand the term 'happiness'?*

Will Davies: Well, there have been various definitions of happiness throughout history, and the history of philosophy. The ones which interest me are approaches to happiness that follow the Enlightenment, particularly in the work of Jeremy Bentham, for whom happiness was really a combination of physical feelings, pleasures, as different combinations and aggregations of pleasure and pain occur over time, they generate these psychological experiences that Bentham called 'happiness', but underlying them, for Bentham, were physical triggers and dimensions. The reason I think Bentham's is an important way of understanding what happiness means today is that that physical account of happiness has got huge credibility today, particularly with the influence of the neurosciences over the last 20 years or so, but also as we look at the rise of things like wearable technology, which monitor stress levels through pulse rate, and body temperature, and sweat, and that sort of thing. We are living in a society which views happiness as quite a physiological, neurological phenomenon, which is quite different from an ancient account of happiness, for instance.

David Edmonds: *And by 'happiness industry', I presume you mean that the private sector has become interested in this idea of happiness for the exploitation of profit?*

Will Davies: Well, happiness is certainly all the rage at the moment in the business world. People working in management, in HR, in marketing, in market research, in advertising, are all trying to draw lessons from the latest frontiers of research on happiness, and research on emotions and the brain, with a view to solving quite chronic problems of employee disengagement, or employee absence, or how to draw someone's attention to a particular advert, or so on. But it's not just the private sector, because governments and policymakers are also interested in how the research and the data on happiness can be used in, for instance, active labour market policies, trying to get people to seek work more actively - so workfare programmes use positive thinking gurus and consultants to try and what they call 'behaviourally activate' the unemployed who might be falling into forms of depression and other forms of mental illness: they have their thinking worked upon to try and make them think more positively, act more positively, to more actively and more optimistically seek work.

David Edmonds: *You mention these gadgets that we can now wear to measure our stress levels. The advances in science and technology, they're crucial to the 'happiness industry' that you've been describing.*

Will Davies: Absolutely. When Bentham was writing about happiness, and different levels of pleasure in our bodies, back in the late eighteenth century, he really didn't have any devices to turn that into an applied science. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century really, with the rise of modern psychology, that people started to first measure and monitor different things like attention, and emotions, and so on; and ever since, the capacity to realise a science of happiness, whether that be in the context of economics, or of marketing, or management, or whatever, has always depended on the sophistication of the technologies, and methodologies, and devices that can purport to get inside our heads and our feelings. Today, there are different affective computing algorithms that perform what's called 'sentiment analysis', which put different emotional numbers on, for instance, a single tweet, or a single text, and can tell you how you're feeling on the basis of how you're using your social media, or your text messaging, or whatever it might be. There are various face scanning and recognition technologies companies like [Affectiva](#), and [Realeyes](#), which provides services for market research and advertising, which claim to be able to tell how someone is feeling from their face. There's a company called [Beyond Verbal](#), which can monitor your tone of voice on the phone and can give a numerical indicator of what that person is feeling, between unhappiness and happiness, or anywhere on a spectrum in that way; and of course, the neurosciences can go even further in getting inside our heads. So all of that stuff is going on, and that is, I think, generating a lot of the exuberance and enthusiasm around this at the moment.

David Edmonds: *Extraordinary stuff. Give me an example of how industry, or indeed government, is using this. Suppose I run a company, and I want to sell sandwiches, how would any of this new technology, and this new information help me if I'm a managing director?*

Will Davies: Well, one obvious example would be the rise of what's called 'neuromarketing', trying to understand consumer responses to brands and advertising by tracking neurological behaviour, by EEG or fMRI, and some of this stuff is quite crude; but there is also more scientifically credible, what's called 'consumer neuroscience': it's an academic discipline, and in the more, I suppose, *excitable* rhetoric of some of the neuromarketing gurus, they talk about things like, we're going to identify the brain's 'buy button', this notion that there's a single bit which persuades you to actually put something in your trolley and pay for it. So that sort of thing is going on.

Now, of course, you could say let's not get too paranoid, because a lot of that stuff is pretty clumsy, and after all, people have been trying to create a science of advertising for over a hundred years now. There are other areas in the workplace where there are companies being developed, and products being developed, which aim to try and monitor employee wellbeing. There's a product called [Virgin Pulse](#), which is an HR service, or a suite of products really, and it includes wearable technology aimed at measuring employee stress in the workplace. It includes a gym membership package, which collects data on wellbeing and fitness: this is very much a physical element, but it's not unheard of for a counselling service to be included in this - now, of course, that brings all sorts of privacy and confidentiality dimensions to it, and I think, in a way that's where the politics of this comes in a lot of the time, and some of the facial recognition services which work on behalf of

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marketing and advertising companies are now moving into public spaces, not just into private spaces, so that you could potentially have your face tracked without your consent, and this is creating civil liberties issues already in the United States.

David Edmonds: *But, if I'm selling those sandwiches, and I want my employees to be happy, there is evidence is there that happy workers means more profits?*

Will Davies: Yes. I mean the research from the happiness economics, by people like [Andrew Oswald](#) at the University of Warwick, is fairly conclusive on this question. Oswald's research suggests that a happy worker is 12 percent more productive than an unhappy worker, and this, in a way, stands to reason. I mean, this is since the birth of HR in the late 1920s, the work of Elton Mayo and others, there's always been this intuition at the very least, if not an objective body of data, that people who are happy at work are going to work harder: even if they're doing something quite sort of mundane and mechanical, just pulling a lever all day, they're probably going to do it more productively if they are happy.

This idea that work and happiness and fulfilment are entangled isn't really that surprising, and no one wants to be served a sandwich by someone who looks utterly miserable, but I suppose the question is, do you then just try and sort of manufacture or trigger that happiness, as a pure sort of behaviour or almost like a facial tick as a way of trying to extract more value, deliver more value to your customer, or whatever it might be; or do you take that intuition, or that evidence and think about, well, in that case, what does this mean for the way in which we organise work, and what does this mean about things like work-life balance, and respect for the fact that people have non-working lives, and family lives, which are probably crucial to their capacity to be happy?

David Edmonds: *Because it sounds like a trend to be welcomed: if an employer wants their workers to be happy, and they provide gyms and, I don't know, increase their pay, and they give them counselling, what could be wrong with that?*

Will Davies: Well, this work plays out very differently in different areas of the labour market. At the very top, executives are terrified of executive stress, and burnout, and heart attacks, and strokes, and this sort of thing, which means that there are these incredibly expensive programmes that executives go on to manage their mind, and body, and health, and so on. At the bottom end, it's very different. In things like call centres, which have very high levels of employee turnover because it's repetitive, quite stressful work with very high levels of surveillance or monitoring to make sure that people are doing things in the right way, and those are the sorts of places which want to tackle stress, but not in a very sympathetic fashion: they just want people to not go sick as commonly.

And in between there's a sort of mixture of the two, I suppose, a mixture of some quite sympathetic touchy-feely stuff, which is not to be entirely sneered at; but also some, occasionally, slightly more intrusive, and you could say manipulative, stuff where research suggests that mindfulness is good for combatting stress, but then people make a leap to saying, well then we should make mindfulness mandatory in workplaces. And there was actually a report by a select committee of MPs last year, which suggested that, having looked at evidence on how mindfulness leads to lower levels of sickness, and mental health problems, and absence, and so on, that, in that case, civil servants should go on mandatory mindfulness training courses, and then be required to meditate as part of

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their work, which is, in a sense, subjecting a spiritual practice to a quite brutal fiscal assessment, which is, well, the taxpayer is losing this many hundreds of millions a year because of absence from work, so we better make them all meditate!

David Edmonds: *Do we need to worry about what the intention is behind this 'happiness industry' if the upshot is that we do end up with happy workers, does it matter that it's, in a sense, inauthentic, that it's manufactured by other people with objectives that we might not necessarily approve of?*

Will Davies: We do need to be concerned by that, because in a way it's a sort of capture of the language of fulfilment, of flourishing, of the language of enlightenment really, by business, by advertising, and so on. I mean, this question of how does capitalism capture the language of its critics and its observers is a kind of longstanding concern of sociologists, particularly in a kind of Frankfurt School tradition, but I think it's important. I think the reasons why people are happy are crucial to what happiness is, I think. Probably more importantly, the reasons people are unhappy should be taken very seriously. If you subtract the reasons why people are unhappy from their unhappiness, all you're left with is this sort of negative affect, a sense of depression, or a sense of just general slump, and it's partly, I think, through helping people connect their unhappiness back to the reasons why they're unhappy, which both, partly what psychoanalysis does, but also partly what political mobilisation does, is to say, well, let's try and identify where this comes from, rather than just treat happiness and unhappiness as purely sort of neural or psychological events, which I think a lot of this 'happiness industry' does.

David Edmonds: *So, the implication of that might be that the 'happiness industry' is really tinkering around the edges, and the much more deeper, structural issues might need to be addressed to really resolve some of the unhappiness that's around us?*

Will Davies: Yes. A lot of the happiness economists, to be fair, they've looked at the evidence, and the data, people like [Richard Layard](#) and others, and they've noticed that societies that are highly unequal, highly individualised, suffer from high levels of loneliness, and so on, have lower levels of happiness, and they've not been afraid to say this is a political, and economic, and quite structural problem. The problem is that the path of least resistance always tends to be teaching people how to change their behaviour and change their attitude, and change their relationships to *their own* minds, and *their own* brains, and the way they use *their* free time, so that what can begin with quite a platform for critical debate, and political transformation, can quite quickly flip into this form of much more individualised demand for people to alter themselves, augment themselves, view themselves differently; and it's not long before you're in the sort of rather more bullying dimension of workfare and the austerity agenda of saying, well, you've got to get out of bed soon, and that way, none of these bad things would happen to you as much, and you'll stop feeling sorry for yourself.

So I think we should respect some of the emancipatory and critical dimensions to this science, but also try and spot the ways in which those dimensions become lost, and the body of evidence becomes harnessed in pursuit of much more manipulative and more conservative agendas.

David Edmonds: *Do you regard yourself as a social scientist?*

Will Davies: Yes, although maybe not one that is particularly disciplined or constrained by a methodological approach. I am a social scientist who's interested primarily in the history and the uses of the social sciences, but I do conduct interviews: I conduct interviews with experts, I interview other social scientists actually quite a lot of the time. In a lot of my work I've been interested in why is it that economics has the power and authority that it does, and to do that I've interviewed lots of economists around the world. I've been quite fascinated by why different bodies of knowledge end up contributing to how we understand ourselves. I suppose you could say that that might be partly a sort of, hopefully not resentful, but maybe a slightly melancholic sense that sociology doesn't have more of a grip on our public imagination than it does. So I almost want to understand, well, why is it that people think in the way that economists do, and why is it that even politicians who've never read any economics, or studied in economics, still speak in a way this is indebted to a particular kind of rationalist, individualist paradigm. So I suppose I'm interested in why that is, or if today people are talking about their happiness, or their brains, or their wellbeing in a certain way, without having ever heard of Jeremy Bentham, or read Richard Layard, and so on. I suppose I'm interested in knowing where do people get their ideas *from*. So, is that social science? Well, it involves an effort to understand the social world, and to do so on the basis of forms of knowledge, but I'm not someone who has a toolkit that I take out into the field in the way that most social scientists are, I suppose.

David Edmonds: *You don't have a clipboard, you're not doing your own surveys, but you're looking around, and you're intuiting, you're identifying strains in society that others might miss?*

Will Davies: Well, I hope so. I think that sociology has always sat in an interesting, and sometimes quite problematic relationship to other social sciences, which seem to have more power, to be brutal about it. Psychology has always had a very willing audience in the business world, in business schools; and economics has obvious authority and influence in the public policy world. Trying to understand that has always been partly, the sociologists have long been interested in that sort of thing. Max Weber was, in his engagement in the *Methodenstreit* of the late nineteenth century, was interested in what would be the space for sociology in relation to these other social sciences, and, again, in a possibly slightly melancholic, or critical fashion, I do have respect for the sociological imagination, which suggests that not everything can be reduced to the individual. How we take decisions, and make our choices, and so on, is not something that can be entirely understood purely on the basis of looking at us as individuals, or our brains, or our bodies, or our minds, or some sort of cost-benefit analysis, and that there is more to social life than that, which is a basic sociological presupposition, but the extent to which that understanding of the social has been sort of lost, or has been marginalised, is, I think, a problem for sociologists themselves to engage with, otherwise they carry on making claims about the social, which the outside world is deaf to a lot of the time.

David Edmonds: *But you also have a quite clear normative agenda, and your work on happiness is quite polemical. You recognise that there are beneficial aspects to it, but basically you're quite miserable about happiness.*

Will Davies: I suppose I think that happiness is better than a lot of what the 'happiness industry' represents it as. I think that we can do better than extrapolate from studies of individual behaviour, or studies of particular fMRI scans, all of which have their own merit and validity within particular scientific limits, but the reductionism of a lot of happiness science, or 'happiness industry', or

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certainly the way it then gets picked up by the business world, and some people in the policy world, is regrettable. We lose the nuance, and the ambiguity, and the mysteries of human life in the process, and I suppose that is the starting point for my critique, or my normative agenda, you could say: it's a romantic starting point, combined with an aspect of a critique of exploitation, or of domination, which resonates with aspects of a Marxist tradition, but also with a republican tradition as well. I probably may be shaped by doing low-wage jobs over the years, where I felt that I was forced to speak language which wasn't mine, or behave in ways that didn't feel like it was honest in some way, and to recognise that there are parts of the labour market, in particular, and the consumer market as well, where I think we are being manipulated; I mean, this is something which social and critical theory has long had a problem with these sorts of things, and I would proudly associate myself with aspects of that tradition of critical and social theory, but I think that it's via the language of happiness that those forms of manipulation currently go on.

David Edmonds: *Will Davies, thank you very much.*

Will Davies: Thank you.