

Review of **The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being over the Life Course**
By Andrew E. Clark, Sarah Flèche, Richard Layard, Nattavudh Powdthavee & George Ward.
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Sociology's Blind Eye for Happiness

Happiness was a topic in early sociology and a core concept in the work of its founding father Auguste Comte ([Plé 2000](#)). Yet the subject is neglected in modern sociology ([Veenhoven 2014](#)), in spite of surging interest in other social sciences, psychology and economics in particular. Illustrative in that context is the fact that terms like “happiness,” “quality of life,” and “well-being” are missing from the list of possible keywords for the category index of this sociological journal.

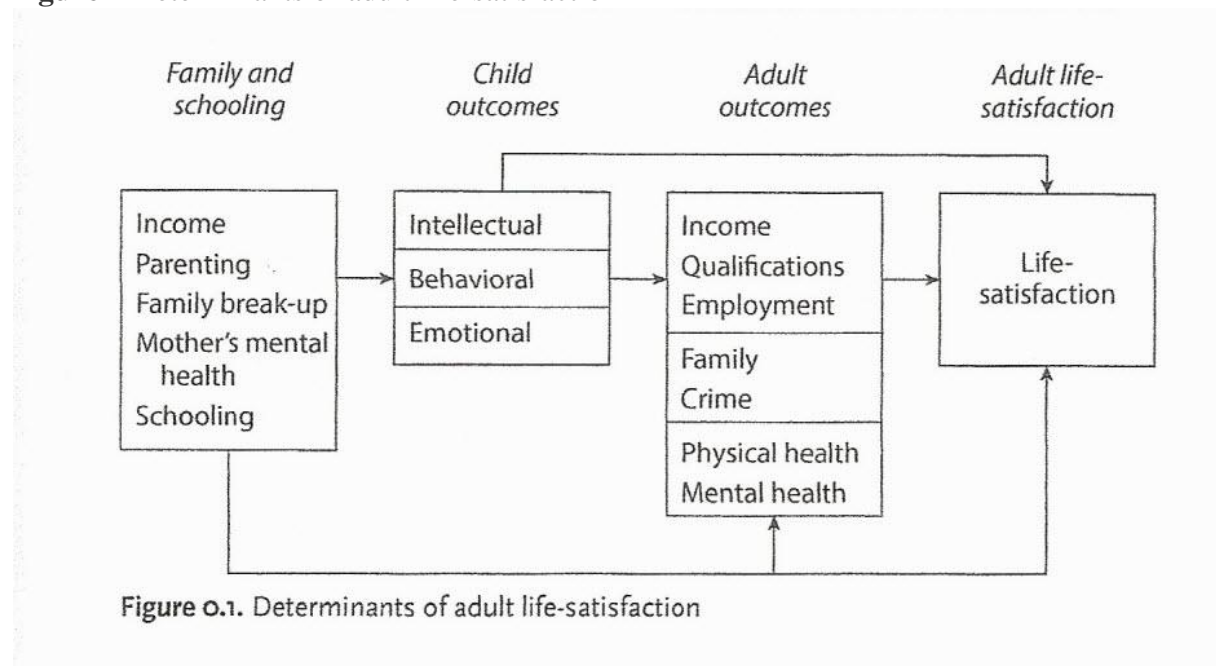
Happiness Economics

Andrew Clark, Sarah Flèche, Richard Layard, Nattavudh Powdthavee, and George Ward, the authors of *The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being over the Life Course*, are economists, and the book presents results of research in “Happiness Economics.” This strand of research crystallized around the year 2000, building on conceptual and methodological foundations laid in psychology and social indicators research since the 1960s. The conceptual focus of Happiness Economics is on subjective life satisfaction, and its main method is empirical assessment of how satisfied people are with their life as a whole, why people are not equally satisfied, and what the consequences of high or low life satisfaction are. Ideologically, Happiness Economics draws on the utilitarian creed that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number of people ([Bentham 1789](#)). A main hub of Happiness Economics is the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics. The authors of this book are members of the “Wellbeing Program” in that center, and this book presents results of this research program.

Contents of This Book

The book provides an easy-to-read overview of the empirical findings on conditions for happiness obtained so far in different studies, among which is the longitudinal British Cohort Study. The causal model investigated is trimly summarized in [Figure 1](#). Chapters in the book are about the arrows in this scheme and present the empirical evidence obtained. Part I of the book is about the effects of conditions in adulthood on life satisfaction, and Part II is about the earlier origins of happiness in childhood. The final Part III is about the policy implications of these findings and how happiness can be included in cost-effectiveness analysis.

Figure 1 Determinants of adult life-satisfaction



Strengths and Weaknesses

A main strength of this book is in the “origins of happiness” category denoted in the left-hand side of the scheme. While the bulk of empirical happiness research is about current conditions for happiness, such as income and health, this book highlights the antecedents of these drivers and the direct effects of past experiences. It does so quite convincingly. Another strength is in the amount and quality of the quantitative data used and in the sophisticated analysis of these provided in the online appendixes. A last strong point is in the last part, on policy implications, which goes into much more detail than usual and provides clear suggestions on how to feed research findings on happiness into the policy process.

On ideological grounds, critical sociologists may object that the book seeks to optimize happiness within existing capitalist society, without contesting this social order. Another ideological objection will be that happiness is not everything; the focus on life satisfaction is often denounced as a “narrow” approach to well-being. Yet broader notions of well-being are typically less clear conceptually, less easy to measure, and less comparable across time and culture, as the graveyard of multidimensional indexes of quality of life shows. The focus on life satisfaction allows the authors to learn more about less.

On methodological grounds, critics can argue that self-reports of life satisfaction can be distorted in several ways, that not all possible causes of happiness have been considered, and that the direction of causality can often not be ascertained. Though there is some truth in these objections, I feel that this book comes close to the best possible at the current state of

the art in this strand of research. It is certainly not the last word but marks a main step to the informed pursuit of greater happiness for a greater number of citizens.

Uses of This Book

The book is well written and clearly organized. It provides a good orientation for academics and policy-makers and can be used as a textbook in university courses on well-being.

References

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[Google Scholar](#) | [Crossref](#)

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