

## REVIEW

**William Davies, (2016) *The Happiness Industry*, London: Verso, Paperback, ISBN: 9781784780951, £9.99,**

Whilst doing fieldwork in Vientiane, Laos, for my PhD looking at the ways in which young people understand happiness, a young man made a throwaway comment to me that ‘you can’t measure a smile...well, you could but it wouldn’t mean anything’. I was catapulted back to this encounter the moment that I saw the cover for William Davies’s book *The Happiness Industry* which features a smile with a scale running along its length which is maybe a ruler, or maybe one of the seemingly ubiquitous survey questions that asks the respondent to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, their happiness.

*The Happiness Industry* (Davies: 2015) is an ambitious illustration of, and challenge to, the ‘entanglement of hope and joy within infrastructures of measurement, surveillance and government’ (pg. 7). Considering the separate yet interconnected historic trajectories of positive psychology and the economics of happiness, Davies suggests that the desire to measure happiness has come about as an attempt to maximise either pleasure (utilitarianism) or profit (capitalism). Given these two distinct aims, Davies leads us to see how the most common approaches to measuring happiness have focused upon measuring either the body (e.g. levels of brain chemicals, neuroimaging, and facial recognition) or measuring financial value and wealth. Examples from advertising, employment practice and mental health diagnostics are effectively used to demonstrate the ways in which these two approaches have become entangled.

The measurement of happiness, thus, is shown to be rooted in an ideology of consumerism and individualism. Viewing happiness as a commodity renders it as something that can be administered by the market and that is to be maximised at all costs. Simultaneously, a focus upon the body turns the responsibility for happiness

inwards onto the emotions of the individual, rather than the institutions and power structures that impact upon the individual. Experts who know how to measure happiness are granted the authority to tell individuals what they should buy or how they should behave differently in order to increase the pleasure that they experience. In this way, the science of happiness becomes, Davies argues, about manipulating individual feelings and behaviours, thus ‘diverting critical attention away from broader political and economic problems’ (pg. 11).

As a community educator and a qualitative researcher interested particularly in happiness and wellbeing, reading this book was often a relief, sometimes uncomfortable and always thought-provoking; the margins of my copy of ‘*The Happiness Industry*’ are littered with exclamation marks and scribbled comments of mostly agreement and occasional dissent. Davies effortlessly draws complex connections between seemingly diverse ideas, at times meandering off on tangents that never fail to ultimately tie neatly back into a cohesive argument. To render happiness objective may be the Holy Grail for psychologists and economists, but, as Davies argues, it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the word.

Yet it is imperative to avoid a descent into absolute, unknowable subjectivity. In a powerful final chapter, Davies suggests an alternative approach to happiness that prioritises the ways in which people together express their feelings and experiences as a way of opening up rather than closing down political dialogue. Such an approach recognises that how people feel about their lives matters and is always situated in social interactions and institutions; genuine democracy requires that people are engaged rather than quantified. Happiness research should, Davies argues, focus on how people ‘engage with their stories and how they tell them’, which requires researchers to relinquish their role as experts in other peoples’ happiness (pg. 269).

My own thesis about happiness reached a similar conclusion from a very different direction and, at the risk of seeming self-indulgent, I would like to finish this review on a personal note. Throughout my reading of my book there was one person constantly in the back of my mind. Sombath Somphone is a friend, community development worker and civil society leader in Laos who believes in the importance

of asking people about the things that make their lives better. Sombath was abducted on 15th December 2015 and there has been no word of him since. The few details of Sombath's story that are known are readily available online<sup>1</sup>, but it is fair to say that part of the reason Sombath was 'disappeared' is that he challenged institutional views of progress in Laos, and, particularly, because he argued for genuine public participation in political dialogue about what makes life good. Sombath's case clearly illustrates the political nature of happiness that Davies unpicks so eloquently. I am sure that he would appreciate *'The Happiness Industry'*, and I can think of no higher compliment that I could pay to William Davies.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sombath.org/en/>