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IN PURSUIT OF THE SUBJECT OF HAPPINESS:

A GENEALOGY

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters

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New Zealand.

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Abstract

This study is a Foucauldian genealogy of the truth and knowledge produced by the Science of Happiness, which is part of the Positive Psychology movement; this is a an historical analytic of the scientific truths and knowledges of the present. Psychological well-being, or happiness, has become a legitimate, and burgeoning, object of scientific inquiry since the formation of the Positive Psychology movement in 2000. The first section reviews the literature for findings from the new Science of Psychology and also reviews the literature on the use of the methodology of genealogy as a research practice. The second section contains the genealogy which, following Foucault's advice, starts with Descartes and the ruptures of the Enlightenment, following the transition of happiness from a matter of luck or chance or the gift of the gods, to a matter that man has control over and the Science of Psychology has an interest in. This section takes fragments of text from Descartes, Spinoza, Bacon, Locke, Blackstone, Jefferson, Bentham, Mill, Carlyle, Dickens, and Skinner to build the genealogy and to show the contingencies of the past that brought us to the scientific 'truths' of the present. The final section briefly reviews the genealogy and explores the trajectories for future work on the subjectivity produced by the scientific subject of happiness.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 30 or so years the discipline of psychology has become interested in happiness. Correlations documented include: People who live in wealthier countries are happier (Hagerty & Veenhoven, 2003). People with achievable goals are happier (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). People who are extraverted are happier (Fleeson, Malano, & Achille, 2002; DeNeve, 1999). People who believe they control their own lives and like that idea are happier (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). People with high self esteem are happier, (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003).

Psychology has also found that people who are happier are less susceptible to disease (Myers & Diener, 1996) and go to the doctor for medication less (Scshwenzfeier, Rigdon, Hill, Anderson & Seelert, 2002). Diener (2000) summarised the studies of happiness by saying happy people participate more in the community, are liked more, live longer, perform better at work and earn more.

On this basis psychology suggests it is good to be happy. As empirical research continues to build upon current knowledge, psychology thinks it can make more of the people happier, more of the time. Two of the most active researchers in the field Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi promote a new form of psychology, positive psychology, a psychology that focuses on preventing pathology by offering tools to improve emotional and mental well being. They say that in the past psychology has had an exclusive focus on pathology and that pathology arises where there is a lack of well being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

> A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p5)

Psychology has found that people seem to have a genetic set point for happiness so that lottery wins and paraplegic bodies are unnoticed (or at least adjusted to) over an individual lifetime (Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Silver, 1982, cited in Diener, 2000; Wolsic & Fujita, 1995; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996) but while 50% of the variation in current happiness is heritable, like cholesterol, happiness is genetically influenced but not fixed (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Psychologists can help influence "normal" people toward happiness.

> If psychologists wish to improve the human condition, it is not enough to help those who suffer. The majority of "normal" people also need examples and advice to reach a richer and more fulfilling existence. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p10)

Psychologists believe they have come a long way with the empirical psychometric measurement of happiness but Ed Diener suggests that the United States should have an National Index of Happiness because 'societies need to afford the same importance to subjective well-being (happiness) as they do now to economics: tracking the phenomenon, supporting research to understand it, and educating people about it' (Diener, 2000, p41). Diener thinks psychology needs to do more measuring, more surveillance of "normal" individuals.

So psychology has empirically based knowledge that certain personal characteristics influence happiness, they suggest these can be taught, and happiness influences health and productivity.

These are knowledges generated in academia but they're also truths that move out into popular culture partially through the discourse of practicing psychologists and partially through less formal, less legitimately knowable texts; it's hard for the media to resist a good sound byte when the study is on that elusive reified state called happy.

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Friday, April 12, 2002 > News > **News Story**

Professor tracks happiness levels

Christina Wall
The Daily Illini

Sophomore in LAS Mike Cozzi thought he was very happy. But after taking a short survey developed by psychology professor Ed Diener, he found out he was about average on the happiness scale.

"I would have said I was above average," Cozzi said. "But it's normal for a person to want to change things in their life. There is always room for improvement."

Diener has been conducting these types of studies on adults of all ages. Diener is one of the few professors in the United States researching happiness as part of the positive psychological movement that has

Liz Smith *The Daily Illini*

When Mike Cozzi asked himself, 'Am I happy?' Mike Cozzi answered, 'Yes. You are very happy.' But Ed Diener could assure him, via a valid, reliable psychometric instrument with the scientific truth that he wasn't very happy at all. So now when Mike Cozzi asks himself, 'Am I

happy?' Ed Diener has provided him with the room to doubt his own answer and the opportunity to improve in that room.

Do not ask to whom the truth is told it is told to thee...

> For Foucault the production of scientific truths about all facets of 'life' and life processes is no longer an abstract or formal problem: it directly concerns the way we live and the ways in which we understand or experience those processes. It is not enough to hope that a 'better' truth is on its way. But neither can we abandon belief in these truths, for they concern our very material existence: our experience of pleasure, illness pain, suffering, joy and so on. (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p83)

In this thesis I am not looking for new truths about happiness nor trying to falsify old truths.

> Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements from my experience – always in relation to processes that I saw taking place around me. It is in fact because I thought I recognised something cracked, dully jarring or disfunctioning in things I saw in the institutions in which I dealt in my relations with others, that I undertook a particular piece of work. (Foucault, 1985, cited in Tamboukou, 2003)

Like Foucault, I take up this work because I think I recognise something dully jarring in the way the 'Science of Happiness' is producing scientific knowledge and forming scientific truths about happiness. Like the truth told to Mike Cozzi that he is only average, truths can produce new spaces and shapes for the bodies of its subject, the objects of its study, to bend into. The Science of Happiness seeks to shape me happy because it thinks I should be.

This work I take up is a genealogical work.

> Foucault's genealogical method reflects on the past to see more clearly what we are in the present and how what we are seeks to constrain what we may become in the future...It is a process of becoming otherwise than we are through the agonic use of reason. (Ashenden & Owen, 1999, p16)

In this work I am trying to see the present, the truths I am told, through the lens of the otherwise. I am trying to ask what effect these told truths about happiness have on the ever-tropic process of becoming of the modern subject.

This thesis will consider first the location from which it is written, the current state of the science of happiness, and the Foucauldian genealogical methodology. It will then document a genealogical investigation of the present science of happiness and consider the spaces opened up for becoming otherwise.