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Citation for published version:

Thin, N 2012, 'Counting and Recounting Happiness and Culture: On Happiness Surveys and Prudential Ethnobiography' *International Journal of Wellbeing*, vol 2, no. 4, pp. 313-332.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

International Journal of Wellbeing

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Counting and recounting happiness and culture: On happiness surveys and prudential ethnobiography

Neil Thin

Abstract: The analysis of numerical data from happiness surveys has caught the attention of governments, corporations, and public media. It is questionable, however, whether the humanistic and empathetic aspirations of happiness scholarship can be well served by numerical reductionism unless this is more effectively complemented by ethnobiographical approaches which explore how self-ratings emerge from cultural contexts and self-narratives. Happiness is imagined, generated, and expressed both through quantification and through stories. In scholarship, as in everyday life, we count and recount our blessings. This somewhat neglected distinction between numerical and narrative representations of happiness applies to conceptual, experiential, and methodological issues. It may help us to understand the social construction of happiness in cultural contexts, in conjunction with other distinctions such as those between affective and cognitive appraisals, and between hedonic and eudaimonic versions of the good life. There are potential synergies between psychometric and ethnobiographical approaches which could help us to recover some of the core humanistic values of the 'happiness lens', namely: *empathy* (respect for subjectivity); *positivity* (attention to goodness); *holism*; a *lifespan perspective*; and *consequentialist transparency* (making progressive intentions and causal theories explicit). Anthropology has good potential to help strengthen these values, particularly by using ethnobiography to help us understand what numerical representations of happiness mean.

Keywords: happiness, culture, anthropology, self-reports, quantification, biography, self, meaning, suffering

1. Introduction: quantitative happiness science and the narrative turn

Happiness scholars explore *how people develop a sense that their lives are good*, and sociocultural anthropology is about *how people become human through the medium of culture*. Both have quantitative and narrative aspects. Happiness scholars ask 'how happy are people?', 'how does happiness happen?', and 'in what ways does happiness matter?'. Socio-cultural anthropologists, typically keener on story-telling than quantification, nonetheless use vague and implicit quantifiers in cultural descriptions and comparisons. Studies of happiness and of culture face a common dilemma: the subject matter is extremely general and elusive, and to develop conversations about it – let alone study it 'scientifically' – we tend to feel obliged to simply and reify these abstractions. Culture becomes 'cultures' or cultural artifacts, or more specific measurable differences between populations. Happiness becomes substantialised in the form of aggregate numbers representing people's self-evaluations.

At the same time as anthropology (like most social research) took a 'narrative turn' in the 1980s (Bruner, 1984; Sarbin, 1986; Kleinman, 1988), the new 'science' of happiness was celebrating the countability of this elusive entity that had throughout human history mainly



been discussed through narrative (Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 1984; Argyle, 1987; Myers, 1993). Arguably, the biggest story of happiness scholarship has been the global public's willing compliance, worldwide, in this extraordinary exercise in reducing complex self-evaluation and life-evaluation to numerical form (Veenhoven, 2012: 454). The sheer bravado of quantitative happiness science has been captivating, and even by the early 1980s the proliferation of happiness scales and measurements seemed to have facilitated a new 'science' of happiness (Diener, 1984). But interesting though the numbers and the debates about them may have been, in themselves they provide information about happiness that is just as inadequate as numerical ratings of symphonies or composers or artists would be as a form of commentary on the arts. The time has surely come for us to make stronger efforts to bring happiness scholarship to interdisciplinary maturity by integrating numerical analysis with exploration of the stories behind the numbers. Anthropology, with its long tradition in empathetic and holistic study of culture and experience, is well placed to help in this process, particularly if it continues to strengthen its interest in ethnobiography (see e.g. Mathews, 1996; Berthon et al., 2009).

Happiness scholarship and anthropology both require us to be evaluative while also respecting individual and cultural diversities and relativities. Through them, we hope to engage empathetically and respect other people's subjectivity while also retaining enough detachment to judge and analyse objectively. In light of these balancing acts it is hardly surprising that proponents of these disciplines in their different ways have not been consistently empathetic (Thin, 2008; 2012a; 2012b). Yet empathy is arguably a core value of both disciplines, both as a methodological *principle* (while studying psychosocial phenomena we ought to try to imagine other people's feelings and thoughts) and as an intended *outcome* (we should provide understanding that can improve prospects for interpersonal and interinstitutional empathy).

Also, in both these disciplines we are studying long-term emergent processes which are not only *understood* mainly through biographical stories, but are actually to a large extent *generated* through collaborative narrative make-believe. Happiness and culture come into existence through conversations and nonverbal interactions. We collude with others to make them happen by developing the stories through which we both interpret and shape our experiences and our relationships. This means that in doing research into the subjective experience of happiness and culture we are engaged in generating the processes we want to learn about. Happiness researchers aren't just capturing information about a pre-existing reality; they are participating in people's construction of what happiness is. In this era of surveys we now think of happiness, in part, in terms of scales and of graphs purportedly depicting growing national 'gaps' between happiness and wealth. Although we may worry about deficiencies and losses of both culture and happiness, there is a key difference: culture is part of our expected inheritance and milieu as humans, whereas happiness is (perhaps increasingly in 'postmaterialistic' societies) something that we must deliberately generate.

All of us seem to maintain two quite different modes of understanding and interpreting the goodness of our lives: we *count* (our blessings, our pains, our position relative to our former selves or our expectations or significant others, etc.) and we *recount* our past and our future (both introspectively in interior monologues and interactively through conversations and expressed narratives). In the social sciences, these quantitative and qualitative modes of enquiry and discourse have tended to polarize into antagonistic or at best mutually distrustful camps of positivists and interpretivists respectively. Bruner (1986: 12-13) contrasted the "paradigmatic" mode of thought (on which logico-scientific rationality is based and which is particularly relevant to understanding the physical world), with the "narrative" mode (which

builds on 'folk psychology' to explore the plot lines of people's lives and the mental processing associated with them). Although another pioneer of the narrative turn, Sarbin (1986), declared that "psychology is narrative" (p. 8), many scholars prefer to keep story-telling out of the shop window, and proceed as if 'data' were synonymous with 'numbers'. Most survey-based academic papers give details of the survey instruments and population samples used, but do not even hint at the heuristics or thin-sliced self-narratives by which respondents may have arrived at their numerical self-evaluations.

2. On scientific reductionism and heuristics

One branch of positivist scholarship does explicitly recognize that survey self-reports are tendentious and partial representations of happiness: Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman has for many years drawn our attention to the "simplifying heuristics" by which people arrive at answers to survey questions, which must be put into play because our numerical self-ratings don't come "ready-made" like names (Kahneman, 1999: 21). Since aggregate scores are unavoidably distortive, he recommends a more realistic way of arriving at scores, allowing us to measure "objective happiness" by using less confusing and (for respondents) less demanding techniques of momentary wellbeing assessment (Kahneman, 1999: 21). These give us a heap of hedonically rated moments which can then be aggregated to provide an overall score.

Fellow psychologist Fredrickson (2000) then pointed out that beginnings, peaks, and ends are justifiably salient in our self-evaluations because they are richer in information about our life stories and our minds. Since happiness is complex, subjective, and narratively constructed, there is no reason to assume that we will get a more valid or useful representation of it by treating it as a heap of momentary pleasures. Analogously, it would be questionable to evaluate the experience of a Wagner opera by meticulously counting not just its exquisite peaks but all of its boring quarter-hours to give an aggregate score. The opera is experienced as a whole: its peaks, its structure and its musical narrativity are what matter.

Kahneman is optimistic that we will soon have developed very much more affectometers and hedonimetric techniques for measuring "experienced utility" (Kahneman, 1999: 18). Even if he is right, we'll still need narratives and other qualitative approaches to conduct responsible life evaluation. As the philosopher Anna Alexandrova (2008) has sensibly recommended, we ought to make intelligent, context-relevant uses of the different kinds of assessment: momentary assessments are helpful in making decisions relating to short-term pleasures and pains, but life satisfaction assessments (and, I would insist, not just numbers but stories too) are more likely to be helpful for considerations of major life-choices.

No social sciences escaped the 'science wars' that in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to exacerbate the 'two cultures' fragmentation between positivistic and interpretive approaches to studying human sociality. But happiness scholarship, with its combination of a rich variety of scientific methods with strong respect for subjectivity and philosophizing, seems well positioned to transcend those often unnecessarily adversarial stand-offs. All serious happiness scholars, in whatever discipline or school of thought, are forced to reflect on the differences and synergies between the generalizing art of measurement and the more idiosyncratic and hermeneutic approaches to understanding happiness via life stories. In scholarship, as in everyday life, we are all both quantifiers and storytellers. So despite the ideal-type distinction between numerical and narrative modes of enquiry and representation, quantitative representations of psychological conditions tend to be strongly intertwined with stories, and stories frequently rely on implicit quantification for their interest and persuasive power.

Indeed, quantitative researchers have long been aware that their numerical analysis is potentially misleading without strong appreciation of how nonspecialist respondents use and understand the vague quantifiers (such as the highly culture-bound 'not too happy' used in USA surveys) on which numerical findings depend, especially when those findings are based on elicited self-reports (Bradburn & Miles, 1979; Schwartz, 1999; Sanford & Moxey, 2003).

In happiness studies, the counting metaphor is associated with 'bottom-up' approaches in which our wellbeing is conceived as a heap of evaluations which can become depressed through pains and elevated by pleasures. The narrative metaphor is more likely to support 'top-down', holistic appreciation of life as a complex organic whole in which a master-plot is interwoven with a variety of subplots, characters, and dramas. In counting-house mode, life is good if the pile is high. It was this elevation metaphor that allowed the poet Robert Frost (1942: 15) to suggest that "Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length." If life domains are counted separately, you have to either average the height of each pile, or specify some weighting according to the salience of each life domain. In narrative mode, life is good if the journey is interesting or if we seem at least to be proceeding in a promising direction. In counting-house mode, we persuade ourselves that happiness is a matter of factual verification: the heap is either high or not. In narrative mode, by contrast, the knowability of happiness is much more dubious: happiness can be consigned to the uninteresting happy ending, dangled on the end of a stick as an unreachable otherworldly ideal, or conceived as the enjoyment or meaningfulness of the journey. Quantified suffering is quite simply a subtraction from the heap, but narrated suffering can acquire a critical role in providing the sufferer's life with interesting contrast, with new relationships with sympathetic others, with some existential meaning, or with a dramatic plot.

As in all other sciences that necessarily transcend the naturalistic-hermeneutic division, happiness scholars may be tempted to avoid debates about the respective contributions of quantitative and qualitative approaches. But the discipline as a whole must recognize the different strengths of these approaches, and seek constructive synergies between them. Much has been made, in many key texts on happiness, of the conceptual parsing of happiness into 'affective' aspects (i.e. how good or bad people feel, emphasized in hedonic approaches taking pleasure as the core meaning of happiness) and 'cognitive' aspects (i.e. how people interpret and evaluate the quality of their lives in more detached and reflective ways, as emphasized in eudaimonic approaches taking value, meaning, fulfillment or perfection as the core meaning of happiness) (see for e.g. Schimmack et al., 2002; Veenhoven, 2012: 453-4). But the distinction between happiness quantified and happiness narrated seems rather more stark, and potentially more instructive but also more threatening if allowed to persist as a cultural divide within happiness scholarship. Over several decades a colossal effort has gone into debating the reliability of various kinds of measures. It is vital that this be matched by more careful debate on whether, when, and why measuring is needed, and how the knowledge it generates can be rendered more comprehensible and useful through exploration of more sophisticated biographical information.

3. Bureaucratic happiness quantification: A product of radical modernity

It seems likely that humans in all cultural contexts have always used both substantialist and narrative metaphors, and consequently both quantification and discursive story-telling, in assessing the goodness of people's feelings and lives. Although 18th and 19th century utilitarians made rhetorical declarations in favour of the quantifiability of happiness, it was only in the 20th century that people tried to put this into practice in systematic research. John

Sinclair, the Scot who invented modern national statistics with the recommendation that their core purpose was to establish the “quantum of happiness” (Sinclair, 1791: xiii), didn’t dare to suggest that anyone try to measure subjectivity directly. Bentham (1781/2000, ch. 4), dreamed of a “felicific calculus” and Edgeworth (1881, ch. 3), speculated about the development of hedonimetry but neither was bold enough to propose any realistic plans let alone to engage in practical experimentation with these ideas. Yet today, it seems to have come to pass that humanity is indulging in a unique experiment in persuading ourselves that happiness is, after all, measurable. Many people would still accept that life stories have an important part to play in understanding happiness, but this is all but forgotten in the public discourse on the science of happiness.

Sometimes, the quantitative and narrative approaches have been combined. For example, interesting stories about happiness have been developed on the basis of numbers, as in Easterlin’s (1974) hugely influential article which convinced lots of people that there was an ‘Easterlin paradox’ in the form of an apparent contradiction between the universally positive income-happiness correlation in cross-sectional studies (i.e. everywhere richer people’s self-reported happiness tends to be higher) and the lack of such correlation in many longitudinal studies (i.e. lots of nations have seen rising income without rises in self-rated happiness scores). Arguably it has been the sheer tellability and newsworthiness of number-based happiness stories that has captured the public imagination. In other cases, conversely, numbers have been derived from stories, as in the famous study of Milwaukee nuns’ diaries and health records, which found the authors of the more optimistic and cheerful diaries to have had better health and longevity (Danner et al., 2001). That study emerged from a lucky natural experiment, but many other longitudinal cohort studies are now tracking lifespan development of happiness and related psychological, behavioural, and situational factors in ways which are genuinely going to transcend the quantitative-narrative divide by showing how self-reports relate to plans, anticipations, events, and memories (Elliott, 2005, ch. 10; Pavot, 2008: 132).

The psychologist Sternberg (for decades a global superstar of psychometrics) describes his own progression from ‘psychometric’ research on love to a more in-depth, humane, and ultimately more revealing and more rational and scientific approach identifying strong cultural patterns evident in analysis of personal love stories (Sternberg, 1998: ix-x, 24). Nonetheless, Sternberg also took the trouble to subject his theories of story types to empirical psychometric testing. Similarly, the number-crunching empirical sociologist Donald Campbell did a total about-turn from his 1960s disparagement of case study methods to strong approval of them in the 1970s (Flyvberg, 2006: 221). The recent ‘Felicitors’ collection in this journal included several biographical papers by scholars who hitherto had specialized mainly in the analysis of statistical evidence on happiness (Helliwell et al., 2011). Freedman’s (1978, e.g. ch. 3) review of mainly statistical evidence on happiness also humanizes the text by providing semi-fictional biographical summaries of composite representatives of ‘happy people’ on the basis of interviews.

Generally, however, the happiness quantifiers – largely social and experimental psychologists (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Veenhoven, 2012), neuroscientists (Davidson, 2004; Hanson & Mendius, 2009) and economists (Frey, 2008; Helliwell & Wang, 2012) – have worked quite separately from the happiness story-builders and biographical interpreters – largely psychotherapists (Frankl, 1959/1984; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Bernstein, 1990), a few narrative psychologists (Bruner, 1986; Baumeister, 1991; McAdams, 2005; Bauer et al., 2008; Bauer & McAdams, 2010), philosophers (Haybron, 2008; Bok, 2010), theologians (e.g. Turner, 2008), and popular self-help and life coaching authors (Riklan, 2004; Swan, 2010). Quantifiers

specialise in finding the most efficient and 'reliable' means of eliciting *self-disclosure*. Narrativists specialize in interpreting the psychological, social, and cultural complexities of *self-making*.

To anthropologists and to anyone interested in cultural diversity, it is startling to learn that despite all the diverse ways of conceiving selves, lives, and happiness, and despite the inevitable indeterminacy of all of these in all cultural contexts, most people worldwide are prepared and able, when asked, to put a number on their happiness or on the quality of their life (Veenhoven, 2012: 454). This 'step one' personal aggregation has given birth to an explosion of 'step two' social aggregation at community and national levels: the survey-based aggregation of numerical self-reports has undoubtedly become the dominant emblem of the new discipline. It is now clear that in aggregate form, these numbers give us useful information that tends to correlate well with other ways of measuring people's overall happiness, life satisfaction, and quality of life (Helliwell & Wang, 2012; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, ch. 14; Diener & Tov, 2012: 144; Veenhoven, this issue).

Treated with due caution, numbers have key roles to play in developing new kinds of conversation about happiness, and in checking the plausibility of common claims and assumptions about its causes and effects. Though no doubt the merits of scientific approaches to subjective issues are sometimes overstated by their proponents (for a critique of unrealistic claims about happiness 'facts' see Wilkinson, 2007; and for a critique of unwarranted causal claims, see Thin, 2012a, ch. 8), prospects for cumulative and robust knowledge generation are surely improved by this insistence on transparent research methods, on clarification and refinement of constructs and survey questions, and on systematic comparison with other studies (Diener, 1984: 542-3).

There are nonetheless good reasons to worry about the numerical *reification* of happiness that is shown in the widespread tendency of scholars, media, and politicians to treat numerical self-ratings as if they revealed a substantial entity called 'happiness'. Just as 'the economy' is an abstraction that takes on a realistic life of its own when measured as GDP, and just as money is a symbol of value which gets mistaken for real worth by so-called 'materialists', similarly it is becoming common to treat happiness – which is obviously highly abstract and ultimately indeterminate – as if it were adequately represented by personal and national scores. In typical public reports on happiness surveys, the Danish 'are' happier than the French, by virtue of some portion of their citizenry having awarded themselves higher digits (e.g. Helliwell & Wang, 2012: 30, 36, 38, 40-42). North Americans have, according to perhaps the most iconic and most common misrepresentation, made no happiness gains since the 1950s (and sometime this heroic claim is expanded to 'the West' in general, e.g. in Layard, 2005: 29). Parents 'are', according to most survey reports, less happy than childless people, and these reports according to one comprehensive review provide clear "empirical evidence" that "beliefs about parenthood and childlessness ... are largely false" (Hansen, 2012: 49). Such overconfident conclusions dismiss out of hand the many interesting debates that might arise through confrontations between survey reports and biographical self-reports.

We are assured on the basis of numerical self-reports that "we are generally quite happy" (Freedman, 1978: 36) or that "most people are happy" (Diener & Diener, 1996). In the Diener's paper, the criterion for being 'happy' is that you believe yourself to have a 'neutral' balance of good and bad feelings or of larger satisfactions and dissatisfactions. They assume that the self-report is the self-evaluation – that people 'are' happy if they self-report themselves a 5 on a 0-10 survey scale. They also assume that people are able, intelligently, to make quantitative comparisons between goods and bads such that a 'unit' of one cancels out a 'unit' of the other.

They then assume, more controversially still, that a 'neutral' self-evaluation is the point at which you can responsibly be described as 'happy'. But can we really tell when a leg pain is neutralized by a musical joy, for example? And if someone says their bad moments are almost as frequent as their good ones, or that they are dissatisfied with almost as many aspects of their lives as those they are satisfied with, can we reasonably call them 'happy'? A little more conversation, and a bit of story-telling, are needed if we are to make responsible use of such survey-based claims.

4. You and your life: Eudaimonism and the mistrust of 'Hokey Cokey Theory'

You put your whole self in, your whole self out.

In out, in out, you shake it all about.

You do the *Hokey Cokey* and you turn around.

That's what it's all about. [Traditional song, UK]

An embarrassed and reluctant father dances in and out to the Hokey Cokey at a children's party. 'I don't think he's really putting his whole self in, do you?' says one onlooker. 'No,' says another, 'I don't think he really believes that the Hokey Cokey is what life is all about, do you?' There are two parts to Hokey Cokey Theory. First, we invent a 'whole self', an integrated identity which we hope will be a good one, like the 'good daimon' from which ancient Greek philosophers developed the idea of 'eudaimonia', or 'thriving'; and we then pretend that this coherent self gives our life some kind of meaning – 'that's what it's all about'. Sceptical adults know this to be always a fragile and provisional invention: we juggle all the time with various private and public selves and roles, and we rely on our own feelings, other people's views, and cultural narratives to tell us whether each version is a good one.

In interaction with other people and with the environment, we develop stories involving a variety of tokens which can be deployed as extensions of the self. Picture now a five-year-old boy on the pitch-and-putt course, who turns triumphantly to his father, shouting 'I'm on the green and you're not.' He demonstrates at that tender age a sophisticated intuition of how the self develops through playful self-extensions. Note that he isn't so immersed in the game that he mistakes the ball for his actual self. He is well aware that when he proceeds to the putting green it is not his whole self that will plop into the hole. I would assume that respondents to the 'all things considered' global happiness survey question are similarly aware that the self-report, like the golf ball or the 'whole-self-in' move in the Hokey Cokey dance, is a playful part-self – a nanobiography, if you like.

Promoters and interpreters of happiness surveys don't consistently show this same level of understanding. In order to get conversations going about national happiness, they suspend disbelief and treat numerical self-reports as if they were self-*disclosures* – i.e., revelations of actual selves and actual happiness – rather than provisional, temporary self-*expressions*. In the absence of evidence to the contrary we trust, in a general sense, that self-reports refer to 'happiness' or to how well people believe their lives are going. Unless there is evidence of systematic distortion, we have no need to worry about occasional rogue responses that are given in bad faith, because the aggregate statistics still give a fair if absurdly concise representation of aggregate happiness. But to find out what self-reports mean, we need to explore how people's sense of self develops through interactive narration in cultural contexts. In doing so, we will learn a great deal about emotion norms, shared narratives, ideal character types, aspirations, and norms of self-presentation that will tell us a great deal more about happiness than we can learn from numerical ratings.

Probably the most tricky demand placed on respondents to happiness surveys is the idea of asking them to evaluate, in a detached way, their 'life-as-a-whole', or to consider 'all things' when assessing their current happiness. Such reports, it is hoped, enrich our understanding of the multiple dimensions of wellbeing by taking into account the multiple domains that respondents hold dear (Rojas, 2003). Respondents presumably recognize some scientific purpose in this extreme act of simplification, but there is no reason to make the Hokey Cokey assumption that they put their 'whole self in' to the numbers they report. Nor indeed is any aggregation – from experiences to self-ratings or from individuals to nations – 'what it's all about': the concept of happiness begs much more sophisticated conversations than can ever be facilitated by the analysis of these numerical reports. Let's not forget that even book-length autobiographies are highly selective in choosing a small set of aspects of the self and life events to disclose. This being so, it is clearly absurd to expect the nanobiographies that we get from survey responses to be more than partial self-disclosures. Arguably, no such survey evidence should be presented alone, without some qualitative enquiries into what the respondents were thinking about when they offered the self-ratings.

To arrive at a single-digit summary of their own happiness or life satisfaction people seem able not just to detach their analytical selves from their experiencing selves, but also to distinguish their selves ('I am a happy person') from their lives ('my life is going well'). There has already been ample debate on the questions of whether people are trustworthy judges of their own wellbeing, and whether survey-elicited numerical self-reports are trustworthy representations of those self-evaluations and life-evaluations. Much less has been said about comprehensibility of the self/life distinction, but the happiness philosopher Dan Haybron provides a provocative introduction. He invited his students to consider the case of George, a very happy man who bases his happiness on the utterly false belief that people love and admire him. Nearly all students agreed that George is 'happy', but half of them disagreed with the claim that he has a 'happy life' (Haybron, 2009).

I interpret this 'happy person versus happy life' distinction as one between hedonic and eudaimonic evaluation, and thence between the relatively simple numerical representation of pleasure and the much more complex, necessarily narrative analysis of the goodness of someone's life. If George reports a high barometric happiness score we may have no reason to disbelieve it. But his life story is one of self-deception, indignity, and vulnerability. The nanobiography that a number gives us can actually be seriously undermined by the more substantial biography that lies behind it, and none of these comes close to full self-disclosure. It may represent mainly or only ill-informed, unsustainable, inauthentic pig-like pleasure of the satisfied fool whose life is worse than that of "Socrates dissatisfied" as J.S. Mill (1861/1957: 9) put it. It's not that animalistic pleasure is intrinsically wrong, it's that it is a small and – according to eudaimonists – 'lower' component of all the happiness that there could be in our lives.

Haybron's example refers to a hypothetical individual and is of tenuous relevance to studies of large numbers of real individuals. But it does remind us that most of us require more than one-shot barometric self-evaluation to assess how well people live: stories matter too, because they tell us about how people's happiness unfolds over time, how it relates to character, and how it emerges from particular social contexts and in response to challenges as well as to pleasures. And if one person's self-evaluation can be deluded, could this not also be true of aggregate happiness scores?

Kahneman (1999) argued in favour of "objective" (p. 7) happiness assessments based on momentary self-evaluations on the grounds that these require much less "cognitive

integration" (p. 19) than is the case with longer and more complex self-assessments such as day recollection or life satisfaction because in these more general, cross-temporal senses, people "generally do not know how happy they are" (p. 21). It might reasonably be inferred from this that scholars who take a 'hedonistic' approach to the good life (happiness as pleasure) are more likely to be counters, whereas those who insist on 'eudaimonic' approaches (the good life as the achievement of meaningful self-actualization) are more likely to be narrators. Still, many scholars espousing eudaimonic perspectives have shown themselves more than willing to subject eudaimonia to numerical reduction, developing scales to measure "Psychological Well-Being" (Ryff & Singer, 2008), "Self-Determination" (Deci & Ryan, 2008), "Eudaimonic Growth" (Bauer & McAdams, 2010), "Personal Expressiveness" (Waterman 2011: 371), "Eudaimonic Wellbeing" (Waterman et al., 2010), and "Meaning-In-Life" (Steger et al., 2006). This multiplication of measures shows the diversity of this unmanageably residual category of 'eudaimonic' wellbeing. Ironically, researchers seeking to prove that it is qualitatively different (and morally superior) to 'hedonic' or 'subjective' wellbeing often end up simply demonstrating only that these various kinds of goodness contribute to a 'quantitative' self-assessment of happiness (for a superb critique of several key eudaimonists, see Kashdan et al., 2008: 223).

So no matter what happiness concept forms the basis of self-report measures, we still need to investigate self-stories to find out what people's self-ratings actually mean. When eudaimonists use terms like 'fulfilment', 'self-actualization', and 'authentic self', there are a host of questionable implicit assumptions concerning ideal selves which people are psychologically capable of distinguishing from less worthy alternatives. Eudaimonists tend to blame self-alienation on life circumstances that inhibit the pursuit of self-actualization (e.g. Waterman, 2011:363-4). But the quest to identify and then approximate oneself to this ideal self could lead, of course, to endless anxieties about which potential selves we should be trying to perfect (Ben-Shahar, 2009). To the extent that it perpetuates self-doubt, Aristotelian perfectionism is an "inhumane doctrine" (Kraut, 1979: 194).

So although new narratives may help us out of alienation, it may have been excessive investment in specific linear projected self-stories that got us into trouble in the first place (Becker, 1997). This is not to say that efforts towards self-improvement are necessarily bad. It's hard to imagine how anyone could progress through life without some process of sifting through choices to reject activities for which we have no aptitude. But to understand how people cope with the unavoidable dilemmas posed by the impossible variety of human potentials and goals, we need to appreciate the role that self-narratives play in enabling people to develop a sense that at least some of their goals and achievements are good and meaningful, or, alternatively, that it doesn't much matter whether they are so long as the pursuit of them is enjoyable and not harmful to others.

A quantifying, 'more-is-better' approach to fulfillment or authenticity won't do because pretending to have a single ideal authentic self is psychologically dangerous. Ideal selves are cultural constructions, not pre-existing entities, and they need to be actively constructed through personal fictions that are sharable with other people. This is not just a simple process of discovering or revealing a 'real' self that exists independently of the stories we co-construct (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Similarly, it has increasingly been argued since the 1980s that cultural representations are narratively co-constructed (Tedlock, 1991). Although we can measure 'culture' when it suits us, what matters is that we appreciate and learn about cultural processes. To assess happiness or culture, we need a narrative approach, which explores how people's conversations with other people, their engagements with cultural narratives, and their

introspective self-dialogues interact to facilitate or inhibit viable autobiographies. Hokey Cokey Theory is problematic for both hedonists and eudaimonists, i.e. to anyone who overinvests in either a numerical self-representation or in an ideal self, because there is no 'whole self' independent of the stories we tell about it.

5. Stop making sense? Meaning and anti-meaning

Overlapping with the boom in happiness studies, there has been since the 1960s an explosion of interest, among philosophers and psychologists, in the concept of meaning-in-life (see e.g. Frankl, 1959/1984; Baumeister, 1991; Steger, 2009; Wolf, 2010). Biographies are important vehicles for both developing and reporting on the sense in which lives can be meaningful. By exploring oral and written narratives from diverse languages and cultures, we can get a sense of the common and idiosyncratic root metaphors through which meaning is developed: life as a journey; as a stream; as an organic cycle of growth and decline; a puzzle or quest; a vessel; a drama or story; a construction process; an investment, and so on. 'Meaning' is a vague term, but we can usefully parse it to distinguish four kinds of existential 'meaning' which biography might be said to convey: *purpose, communication, order, and justice*.

Purpose is about linking outcomes with plans and anticipating the pleasure of intentional achievement. In Western autobiographies, arriving at a sense of purpose is often associated with a cathartic crisis or "turning point" beyond which an individual begins to live what they see as their true destiny (Bruner, 2001: 32). Turning points can, however, denote the repression of individuality, and its immersion into a new sense of belonging in a set of cultural traditions. In *Sun Chief*, the autobiography of Don Talayesva, a Hopi chief of Arizona, the structure of the story depends heavily on the painful initiation rite as a 'turning point' at which individualist mischief and lack of direction was literally flogged out of him so that he learned to "live right" by obeying elders and respecting ancestors (Simmons 1942: 87). Purpose considerations are therefore about personal control and agency, but also about teleology or destiny – the idea that a life seems to be leading towards some predefined outcome and that good luck or bad luck along the way is somehow 'meant to be'.

Communication generates connections between speakers and hearers, between symbols and referents, and between the constituent parts of an utterance. By telling a life, we seek authentication from an actual or imaginary audience (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Life reviews also try to establish a sense of *order*, the antithesis of chaos or patternlessness. Order can be based on *internal consistency* (the sense of fit between the different activities, roles, and phases of an individual's life) and *external consistency* (links between the individual and broader patterned environments social, historical, environmental, and cosmological or 'spiritual'). Worldwide, people are interested in the aesthetic quality of individuals' lives, seeking the sense that someone's life has a good 'feel' or 'pattern', that it is a good example of a human life, that it is not a 'mess'.

These 'prudential' and 'perfectionist' considerations can also be complemented by ethical criteria, concerning whether the relations between efforts and rewards in someone's life seem to exhibit *justice*. When the expected links between efforts and rewards are severed through bad luck or enemy action, this is perceived not only as injustice but also as a loss of meaning. Violence is 'meaningless' (to witnesses and victims, though not necessarily to perpetrators) if it lacks a clear sense of purpose and justice. In suffering narratives, it can be tamed by being rendered meaningful. Alienation and self-doubt, similarly, can be tamed through narrative self-justification. It is no accident that many of our early Western autobiographies were called 'confessions' or 'apologia' – self-justifications: an interest in conscious choices between diverse

human potentials is bound to lead to self-doubt and guilt. As has often been demonstrated empirically in recent years, telling or writing down stories about our lives has important therapeutic benefits (Myerhoff, 1978; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; McAdams, 2005). Presumably, they achieve this in part by helping us justify and make sense of crucial life choices that we can never be sure were good ones.

If self-narratives as the means by which people make sense of their lives have so much emotional and moral baggage invested in them, you can understand why some researchers, not only in the positivist happiness quantification camp but also in qualitative anthropology, have chosen to ignore autobiographies as sources of information on happiness and culture. But can we really avoid this problem by relying instead on numerical self-reports, which force respondents to thin-slice intuitively rather than ponderously? When we make meaning through stories, we learn about how adversities can become resources for progress and meaning. So the aggregator's argument, that it is better for a nation to report as much positive affect and as little negative affect as possible, may not work at the level of the individual: here, it's not just the arithmetic that matters but the stories make the numerical self-reports possible.

Biography can serve to describe, celebrate, and highlight any of the above qualities (purpose, communication, order, and justice), but is often a key means by which such qualities are invented. And the generation of meaning can be done, ironically, through tales of disjuncture, alienation, and meaninglessness which are then overcome. What cross-cultural biographical studies can offer, potentially, is a sense of whether these various kinds of 'meaning' which have become such prominent concerns in modern Western philosophy are similarly evident in the life stories that people tell in diverse cultural contexts, or whether different kinds of meaning are emphasized, or whether perhaps the idea that life should be meaningful is barely expressed at all.

First-person perspectives are unavoidably hard to interpret: they are filtered in so many ways that many researchers and policy-makers choose to reject them as too distorted, and their interpretation and evaluation too morally fraught, to be worthy of policy consideration. What I tell a researcher about my satisfactions will in the first place reflect not simply my actual feelings and views (which in any case may be highly volatile and uncertain, varying from moment to moment and from one encounter to another) but also my preferences for what I want the researcher to record about me. This may be distorted in major ways by my expectations of what the study ought to report, or by my desire for approval or recognition or pity, etc. Even if given a truth drug which forced me to give the most accurate rendition of my true feelings, these would in any case be strongly influenced by many factors other than objective circumstances. For example, my current life satisfaction reflects my previous experiences, my views on what a good life should be like and on what I deserve, my expectations for the future, my perceptions of what selected individuals or categories of relevant other people have and what I think they enjoy.

All of these interpretive challenges apply just as much to numerical self-reports. Box 1 (below) summarises some of the key considerations that we would need to discuss with a respondent if we wanted to understand the thinking behind the numerical self-report.

From this it should be clear that there are great gains to be made from conducting ethnographic and biographical enquiries at the same time as doing surveys. This is rarely done (although for some examples of mixed-method ethnographic approaches, see Selin & Davey, 2012). At its simplest, it would involve asking at least a sample of respondents to say, briefly, what they had in mind when they rated their happiness or life satisfaction. More adventurous work might involve, for example, systematically reviewing large numbers of personal diaries

or blogs to identify trends in aspirations, experiential salience, remembrance of the past, and so on. This might be done in conjunction with longitudinal surveys to help researchers develop a sense of the stories behind the numbers.

Box 1. Variable considerations when thinking about life satisfaction

Number and variety of domains considered: how many aspects of life are thought to matter, and are some more important or salient than others?

Meaning/interconnectedness of domains considered: is the quality of some domains of experience dependent on others? How important is the sense that life has some overall coherent meaning or consistent story line?

Time preference: is the emphasis on the present, the recent past, the distant past, or on anticipated future happiness? Do ultra-happy childhoods present a threat to the wish to see progressive improvements in happiness through the lifecourse?

Summative or dynamic: how important, if at all, is the criterion of gradual progress from worse to better over time?

Postmortem welfare: how, if at all, is the assessment influenced by belief in an afterlife, or doubts or worries about postmortem rewards and punishments?

Legacy: how, if at all, is the assessment influenced by thoughts of our postmortem influence on the people and places that survive us?

Self-concept: is a discrete individual the main or only consideration, or do some people evaluate their own life satisfaction only as part of a wider collectivity?

6. 'Happily ever after': Constraints on happiness narration

For all its diverse possible referents, happiness is essentially a *psychobiographical* concept, a lens through which we think evaluatively and narratively about people's selves and lives. The enjoyment of life becomes significant, and is culturally legitimated and structured, through life reviews and life stories. Oddly, although all humans are interested in how good and how meaningful people's lives are, the stories we tell about lives are rarely prudential (i.e. focused on what is good for the person whose life is under consideration). The overwhelming impression from browsing published biographical literature is that life stories (oral or written, real or fictional) tend to be either heroic and dramatic (focused on unusual achievements and struggles) or pathological (focused on exceptional suffering).

This neglect of the *prudential* value of stories and events (how good they are for the person whose life is being told) is often strongly embedded within narrative traditions which seclude happiness in the bland hereafter of the un-narrated happy-ever-after ending and not in the cut and thrust of a good narrative. The idea that happy lives should go untold was similarly expressed by a Paxtun woman who told the anthropologist Bénédicte Grima "I have no story to tell: I've been through no hardships" (Grima, 1991/2002: 53), and before that by Tolstoy's (1878/1954) quip in the first line of *Anna Karenina*, that "all happy families are alike". Just as Hegel (1822/1975) noted that happiness is on the "blank pages of history" (or "happiness writes white ink on white pages" as De Montherlant (1958) put it), so in story-telling – fairy-tales, fiction, book-length biographies or everyday personal narratives – happiness tends to be marginalized or hinted at through other themes such as ambition, success, and love.

Pursuers of happiness studies may want to fight this kind of prejudice, and demonstrate that many of the most interesting biographical themes are about happiness. But they may also learn indirectly about happiness and life meanings from stories about how people struggle with adversity and existential doubt. The anthropologist Paul Stoller (2007) notes how among intellectuals, himself included, the challenge of life-threatening illness often provokes strong desires to express a new sense of awareness of one's place in the world and of the meaning of one's life: "there are, of course, few things more intimate in life than illness. And so it stands to reason that illness narratives are widespread" (p. 184). It may well be that there is a pan-human tendency to appreciate what matters in life through narratives of suffering and deprivation, and that – as the phenomenological anthropologist Michael Jackson puts it in his recent book on ethnographic approaches to wellbeing, we need to understand this "not as a settled state but as a field of struggle" (Jackson, 2011: 1).

Biography is not just about reporting and generating meaning for the protagonists of life stories. Listening to, narrating, and analyzing life stories are key means for developing interpersonal concern and empathy. Life stories are among various ways in which we can show prudential interest in the goodness of other people's lives. Asking and telling about well-being is not just expression of pre-existing facts: our happiness, or at least our affective competence, requires explicit everyday recognition from other people. Szalai (1980) pinpoints one of the paradoxes of wellbeing when he notes that in most cultures there are standardized greetings in the form of wellbeing enquiries ('How are you?' etc.), yet the expected standard replies to such questions ('Fine' and/or, reciprocally, 'How are you?') don't necessarily contain any information about wellbeing other than that the respondent is well enough to observe this social convention. Humans are uniquely and universally concerned about wellbeing and seem to believe in the possibility of making and expressing homogenized assessment of the multiple domains of wellbeing. But we don't generally follow this concern through to careful interpersonal, intertemporal, or cross-cultural wellbeing comparisons. Just as narrative traditions discourage interest in happiness, so too the conventions of interpersonal dialogue make it hard to include substantial attention to wellbeing in normal conversation.

Although our identities are closely intertwined with the ways in which we communicate our moods and emotional dispositions, anthropological studies of identity have rarely ventured into consideration of the emotional implications of the communication and formation of identities. But humans need other people to recognise not just the various *cognitive* aspects of our identity (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) but the *affective* aspects too. Identities depend on intersubjective negotiation: they are generated through interaction, recognition, and perhaps above all by narration.

Biographical story-telling seems a particularly suitable place to develop engagements between anthropology and happiness studies. Through such engagements, anthropology could become more cheerful and realistic, while happiness studies could become less ethnocentric, more holistic, and better informed by qualitative analysis and ethnographic research. Anthropologists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and philosophers all make substantial use of life histories, life reviews, and self-narration. But ethno-biographers still exhibit biases which inhibit the exploration of happiness. An adequate representation of society conveys some sense of how people experience life and find meaning in it, and of how these experiences and meanings have changed. In his pathbreaking book *Illness Narratives* (1988), the foundational text in the anthropology of suffering, Kleinman rightly criticizes modern medical practitioners' inattention to the "experience of illness" (p. xiv). His own unremittingly pathological work, however, like that of most of his colleagues in medical and psychological anthropology, can by

the same token be criticized for its almost total lack of interest in the experience of happiness. Kleinman's more recent biographical work *What Really Matters* (2006) makes his own existential pessimism more explicit. He tells life stories of a few exceptionally tormented individuals, and concludes that "what really matters" is "facing up to our existential condition" (Kleinman, 2006: 231). To Kleinman and his interviewees, this means resignation to life's awfulness. He does fleetingly acknowledge the place of "joy, exuberance, and fulfillment ...love and hope" (Kleinman, 2006: 13) and suggests that by making sense of traumas and finding dignity and meaning, we may achieve a kind of "quiet liberation" (p.10) despite a nagging sense of hopelessness. Still, life is, for Kleinman, basically miserable. As noted above, Jackson tries to make a virtue out of the miserabilist outlook in trying to make sense of the lives of traumatized West Africans (2011), and there is now a thriving industry in ethnobiographies of suffering (e.g. Nash, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Das et al., 2001; Grima, 2002/1991; Biehl, 2005; Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007; Mattingly, 2010).

7. Conclusions: The happiness lens in positivist, ethnographic, and biographical research

As I have argued previously (Thin, 2012a: ch. 1) the "happiness lens", i.e. the most morally and intellectually compelling principles and values of happiness scholarship, can usefully be spelled out as five qualities:

- 1) *empathic respect for subjectivity* (showing an interest in people's feelings)
- 2) *positivity* (paying attention to goodness, so as to offset the normal social science bias towards pathologies)
- 3) *holism* (exploring 'whole lives' by looking at how the various domains, inputs, events, and processes interact)
- 4) a *lifespan perspective* (exploring 'whole lives' through time, by enquiring into their narrativity – how they are anticipated, experienced, remembered, and communicated in both internal conversations and externalized self-stories).
- 5) *consequentialist transparency* (an acceptance of the responsibility to explain how we expect our values, institutions, and activities to translate into good lives – i.e. making explicit our implicit happiness theories).

These principles and objectives are easy to assert, but do our methods and the themes we explore actually help us pursue and exemplify these principles in action? Theoretically, happiness surveys promote all of these values: they elicit first-person perspectives on the goodness of life, which are then analysed so as to develop and test causal theories of the interaction between happiness and various factors. Yet it is ironic that happiness scholarship has largely come to public attention via survey findings, since these are surely the least empathetic, most reductionist, and most decontextualizing and temporally blind of social research methods. Scientific detachment is required of the surveyor, while the respondents are required to meekly answer the restrictive questions which either show no interest in the content of their happiness, or do so in a piecemeal fashion with no attention to narrative happiness. Respectful of the first-person perspective to the point of naivety, the happiness quantifier is interested in whether your glass is half full but refuses to listen to your stories about what's in the glass and how it got there. Positivist happiness derives from 'humanistic' psychology, but it has sacrificed too much of its humanity and philosophical plausibility in order to grab our attention by reducing happiness to a thing-like, countable entity that seems systematically comparable across time and space (Annas, 2004).

Anthropology, by contrast, generally favours ‘participant observation’ methods which deliberately promote empathy between researchers and informants. The key source of anthropology’s best potential contributions to quality-of-life studies lies in the *intimacy* of primary research encounters. In theory at least, these promote a strong sense of empathy with research subjects, a humane respect for subjective viewpoints, and a capacity for observing how life narratives and aspirations emerge from socio-cultural contexts. As Edgerton (1990) has argued, longitudinal ethnographic research allows us to understand better how wellbeing emerges over time in relational ways. Anthropological intimacy and empathy, when they are emphasized, put anthropology in stark contrast to the conscious avoidance of these in experimental psychology and behavioural economics, and to the less deliberate intimacy-inhibiting use of survey tools by social psychologists and sociologists. However, in recent years the trend has been for anthropologists to seek out people who are sufficiently miserable for them to *sympathise* with, and by systematically ignoring happiness most anthropologists demonstrate in practice a significant form of empathy failure.

Table 1 (below) sketches out some of the different ways in which, as I hope I have demonstrated above, the core principles and values of happiness scholarship are promoted or inhibited by various cultural features of positivist happiness science, socio-cultural anthropology, and biography.

Finally, it is worth considering the implications of these discussions for policy and practice. In the final section on policy in the first World Happiness Report, the authors (all economists) argue that it is “highly desirable that happiness be measured by firms, communities, schools, hospitals and even medical practitioners. This will permit a more rapid increase in knowledge about the sources and consequences of happiness.” (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012: 94). While it is clearly desirable for all of these institutions to be guided by good understanding of the causes and effects of happiness, this recommendation seems unduly optimistic in its assumption that these kinds of institution could in general make responsible use of quantitative methods. Except in the largest kinds of firm that could afford to hire in expertise and conduct reliable large-scale surveys or other numerical observations, it seems likely that quantitative methods could at best be used as a very rough way to start conversations about a variety of satisfactions. By contrast, any organization of any size, even ones with no social scientists, could reasonably be expected to make good use of qualitative research on happiness: anyone with basic social skills and empathic awareness can get other people to provide instructive stories about their sources of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, meaning, and motivation.

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Publishing Timeline

Received 10 May 2012
Accepted 4 September 2012
Published 13 December 2012

Table1. Happiness in positivist, ethnographic, and biographical approaches

	Positivist Happiness Science	Sociocultural anthropology	Biographical studies
Empathy and subjectivity	Empathy promoted by showing respect for people’s own views on their wellbeing and its causes; but inhibited by over-reliance on survey and experimental methods.	Empathy promoted by intimate long-term participant observation, allowing respondents to express themselves at length, and by encouraging self-reflexive auto-ethnography; but inhibited by lack of interest in happiness.	Empathy promoted through the rhetoric of personal stories with strong plots, psychobiographical observations, and engaging plots; but inhibited by lack of interest in happiness.
Positivity	Core interest in happiness and the good life is the key strength and novelty of happiness scholarship. In some survey approaches, too little respect for eudaimonic happiness.	Until recently, no systematic interest in happiness, strong pathological bias, plus some naively romantic celebration of nonwestern virtue and happiness.	Strong emphasis on positive strengths, virtues, and success, but little systematic interest in happiness. Psycho-biographies and socio-biography tend to have strong pathological bias.
Holism	Strong interest both in developing summative indices of whole-life wellbeing plus exploring domain-specific wellbeing. Limited exploration of how these are woven together through personal and cultural narratives.	Holism has always been a key value and strength of anthropology, though sometimes inhibited by excessive social constructionism and downplaying of somatic and psychological factors.	Key strength of biography lies in showing how temporality, emplotment, characterization, and meaning-making work together to formulate coherent or meaningful lives and selves.
Lifespan perspective	Downplayed in cross-sectional surveys but getting more attention through longitudinal studies	Crosscultural varieties and commonalities in the structuring of the life course is a key theme, along with ritualisation of life crises and transitions. Was in the past inhibited by atemporal snapshot representations of social reality, but is increasingly strengthened by ethno-biography.	Lifespan development is a key theme in biographical studies, though typically the individualist-hagiographic approach inhibits attention to cultural and social structuring of the life course.
Consequentialist transparency	Clear recognition that happiness is at the core of ‘what really matters’. Weaker attention to causal theories, particularly due to sloppy causal inferences on the basis of correlational evidence.	Limited (and sometimes pathological) attention to the ‘what really matters’ question, and evaluative analysis is inhibited by tradition of anti-western/anti-modern cultural relativism	Good representation of personal values and personal theories of how things turn out. Tends to be weaker on contextual analysis of socio-cultural causality.

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