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A STRATEGY AND ROLES FOR URBAN PLANNING IN FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS

ABSTRACT

The human dimension of sustainability – the balance of planet, people, and prosperity concerns – importantly includes wellbeing that is the means to the end of happiness. This paper explores what we think that we know about happiness, possible roles of urban planning in fostering happiness, and how environmental features can be enhanced by planning and so contribute to the happiness of a city's residents and visitors. Recent developments in positive psychology provide a basis for this inquiry, and are reviewed. A focus of this paper is on The Happiness Initiative in Seattle, Washington. This recent non-governmental program, begun by Sustainable Seattle, is inspired by the earlier effort in Bhutan to replace or augment Gross Domestic Product with measurement and attention to the Gross Domestic Happiness. Finally, the paper will explore how findings from research on factors contributing to happiness can be applied in urban planning.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: SUSTAINABILITY - HAPPINESS WELLBEING - SOCIAL METRICSS

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle posited that "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." The U.S. Declaration of Independence cited pursuit of happiness as an unalienable right of humankind along with life and liberty. What is the nature of happiness, and how might urban planning seek to foster and contribute to residents of a locality realizing it in their lives? Our knowledge of both of these issues is currently limited, but particularly over the last two decades considerable progress has been made in defining and gaining an understanding of factors that influence the happiness that people feel, and this emerging understanding can inform planning and public policy. Figuring out what we think that we know about what happiness means can provide the basis for exploring the factors that contribute to it, and subsequently which of these factors could inform planning.

SOME DEFINITIONS OF HAPPINESS

In the view of Aristotle, happiness is the realization of one's capacities as a human being. Newer definitions focus on how people subjectively evaluate their lives; including engagement with experiences, satisfaction, positive and negative emotions, and meaning (Diener, 2004) Some of the contributors to happiness include time spent in pleasurable activities such as with recreation and with friends, employment that provides satisfactions as well as income, deep engagement with activities being pursued, and the confidence and resilience to face changes with a positive attitude (Dolan, 2008). Even so, there are a number of perspectives on life, each giving rise to a different weighting on life conditions that result in what one perceives as being happy. These perspectives include happiness as net pleasure, positive emotional states and aspirations, self-fulfillment, high

virtue, and overall life-satisfaction (Layard, 2005). Each of these appear to assume that basic material needs are being met, and consequently that a person can turn to seeking happiness in one or more of these forms.

The concept of happiness is sometimes confounded with the notion of wellbeing, and with fulfillment (Bacon, 2010; Cummins, 2003). Some argue that these are different things, and others suggest that happiness is an element of wellbeing. And while there is considerable agreement that the public sector should undertake activities that make people feel better and that reduce anxiety and stress – to create conditions that will likely contribute to happiness – because there are a number of definitions and individual differences in situation and predilection, happiness and wellbeing are difficult to measure (Diener, 2006). But similarly individual competence levels and even gross national product have proven challenging to measure, yet are the focus of important public policies (Layard, 2005). Measurement is important if happiness is to get the policy attention that it deserves and if there is to be accountability that plans and programs adequately contribute to it (Frey, 2011). While we are in the developmental stages of designing reliable and valid metrics of happiness, empirical evidence and analysis does provide understanding of some of the things that are important to happiness, as well as some of the things that shape one's happiness (Clark, 2002). A framework for addressing important factors contributing to happiness is to look at features that planning might address that relate to people throughout their lives including: health, arts and culture, environment, and community. Additionally, we can look at factors that affect happiness at various stages in one's life.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO HAPPINESS THROUGHOUT LIFE HEALTH

The World Health Organization as well as other agencies point out that physical health and mental health are interrelated, and that both are important to people in evaluating their subjective wellbeing. Positive health in both of these forms is widely taken to mean conditions that facilitate individuals enjoying their lives and realizing their potential; some would call this flourishing. Self-reported ill health is increasing in most societies, and contributors including smoking, use of drugs, and obesity are public policy concerns. Recent public sector responses include increasing opportunities and coaching for physical activities, services encouraging healthy choices such as diet and smoking reduction, and health services that emphasize maintenance rather than a focus on treating illness.

Arts and Culture – Personal engagement in cultural and arts activities contributes to happiness in several ways. These include self-expression, increased mindfulness, sense of accomplishment and competence, motivation and self-worth, and development of social networks and cohesion (Diener, 1998). For young people, benefits can include more self- expression and academic accomplishment and better social behavior. Direct participation is seen as providing values that are not realized in observing performances as an audience, though the two are related. Consequently, many governmental programs encourage and support direct engagement in artistic and cultural activities.

Environment – The physical setting in which people live and work is a major influence on their sense of wellbeing and happiness, and is the area of concern that urban planning has traditionally focused. The role of exposure to nature and vegetation is understood to contribute directly to

aesthetic pleasure as well as a sense of competence and a lowering of stress. Poor air and water quality and noise are sources of annoyance as well as threats to health, with a heavy cost to happiness. Conversely, interactions with the environment that contribute to sustainability also appear to contribute to happiness. These include such things as substituting cycling and public transport for private automobile use, community gardening and encouragement of local and organic agriculture, engagement in environmental conservation activities such as stream restoration help create a stronger sense of community and place, that in turn contribute to happiness.

Community – A sense of belonging to a community, having social contacts through a network of people with whom one is familiar, and empowerment to influence what goes on in one's community all contribute to personal wellbeing and happiness (Hothi, 2008). A positive social context includes norms and personal familiarity that gives rise to social cohesion and social behaviors that are not threatening, including reduction of crime and the fear of crime. And low crime rates have been found to be a prime consideration to people when they choose a place to live (Kruge,r 2007).

Social networks include both communities of interest that may be non-spatial, and place-based communities such as neighborhoods. Organization of people living in geographic communities is a means of exercising influence over their immediate environment, and that sense of empowerment or reduction in feelings of powerlessness support happiness. Engagement in direct democracy also is a means of developing social capital that increases the effectiveness of people individually as well as collectively (Van Praag, 2003).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HAPPINESS AT VARIOUS LIFE STAGES

While the preceding discussion noted some of the drivers of happiness that affect the population at large, it is important as well to realize that there are factors that relate to specific life stages – from childhood through retirement years.

Childhood and Families – In the early years of life, the quality of child care and parenting are important in shaping aptitudes and outlooks both then and later in life. Family break-up can result not only in reduced parental supervision but economic difficulties that cause stress in the household, affecting happiness. Good preschool and child care opportunities contribute importantly to a child's effectiveness in taking advantage of education, as well as behavior, and sense of security (OECD, 2009). Services that promote social networking, effective parenting skills, and involvement of children in sports and arts all contribute to their emotional growth and wellbeing.

Youth and Education – The school-age years are especially important to intellectual development and learning resilience or the emotional competence to cope with life's successes and set-backs. School experiences that contribute to creativity, problem solving, and critical judgment are important in preparing young people for a satisfying life and for employment that in turn affects happiness (OECD, 2009). Many of these skills can be acquired during the early school years, and some such as critical judgment are more effectively addressed in the teen years, from 16 to about 19 when major life changes occur. Concern is growing that the testable knowledge demands of curriculums are crowding out treatment of important softer life skills that are important to a later sense of wellbeing.

Working Years – Successful work life is important not only for income but for job satisfaction that surveys indicate is a major basis for happiness. Major contributors to job satisfaction include good supervision, room for creativity and variety, adequate income and security, and social contacts and regard that result from work life. Unemployment results in significant unhappiness and often lingering feelings of inadequacy and depression (Clark, 2001; Winkelman, 1998). Increasing research attention is being focused on 'work-life balance' as a basis for wellbeing and happiness (Burke, 2008; Krueger, 2009). A work-related concern is time-consuming travel to work and its effects on health, frustration, and reduced job satisfaction (Stutzer, 2008). This relates to the earlier comments on environmental contributions to happiness, and the role that planning can play in reducing time-distances between activities. Recent research has found that high income, beyond a level that provides modest material comfort, does not result in similar increases in happiness, though people are responsive to the relative incomes of those in similar jobs (Dolan, 2008; Kahneman, 2010).

Older Age – While retirement is increasingly delayed for economic and job satisfaction reasons and for a sense of being valued, increasing numbers of people are living for many years and are in good health beyond the conventional period of employment. Even so, this life stage will frequently include loneliness, bereavement, and later reduced physical capacities. Concerning happiness, some research is concluding that later life for most people is a positive experience with happiness levels comparable to those enjoyed by people in early adulthood: that happiness follows a 'U'-shaped curve declining from youth to mid-life and then rising again during older age (Blanchflower, 2008). While public programs tend to focus on the elderly with health and other problems, there is value in programs that promote independent living among the majority of this age group that is more fit and to

assist them to cope with threats to this. This assistance can include recreational and social activities that keep older citizens engaged in the community, services as necessary that facilitate remaining in their own homes, and public transportation that reduces dependence on driving.

This brief discussion leads to a number of conclusions. These include that there are a number of drivers of happiness and wellbeing that apply to people throughout their lives. And it points up that one size does not fit all: that people in various life situations including household composition, employment and income, and stage in life have differing problems that affect their levels of happiness, and that these differences need to be taken into account in understanding their wellbeing and in designing public programs and initiatives that promote happiness. This discussion also provides a basis for describing and assessing the Seattle Sustainable Happiness Initiative.

SEATTLE HAPPINESS INITIATIVE

The Seattle Area Happiness Initiative was initiated by Sustainable Seattle, a non-governmental organization that gained international recognition as being the first to develop and apply a set of sustainability indicators in 1991 (Miller, 2004). This was a grass-roots effort involving an open public process in identifying an ambitious list of indicators that could be used to report on local process with respect to sustainable development practices, and then narrowing that list to 32 indicators. In several successive reports during the 1990s and early 2000s, each of these were described, performance over several years was presented in a time series, and interrelations between them was discussed (Miller, 2007). Sustainable Seattle reports that over 100 localities in the US have used this project to design their own counterparts, and the UN recognized this Seattle program as outstanding.

In 2011, Sustainable Seattle initiated the Seattle Area Happiness Initiative, in collaboration with Take Back Your Time, another Seattle-based organization. The mission of this project is "...to provide a comprehensive assessment of wellbeing and to engage and inspire people, organizations and policy makers to action" in replacing Gross Domestic Product with creditable evidence concerning Gross Domestic Happiness. The acknowledged source for this idea is the work by the country of Bhutan to address and measure happiness, and initiatives in Canada and Brazil to do so as well.

The first phase of this project was to develop a survey instrument, based largely on the 2010 Greater Victoria Wellbeing Survey (Happiness Index Partnership, 2010). This survey was distributed by email lists and taken by over 500 people, but funding was not available to carry this out involving a random sample. The second phase was to assess and modify the set of life domains or groups of factors influencing happiness and wellbeing generated in the Bhutan project, and to identify objective indicators under each of these domains for the purpose of doing much the same thing that the sustainability indicators project did, but with a changed focus on happiness. Many local residents participated in these two activities, some in the role of the lay public, some as experts in design and use of indicators (www.susstaina-bleseattle.org/sahi). The Seattle City Council went on record as encouraging these activities, funded bringing people engaged in counterpart initiatives in Bhutan and Victoria, BC to Seattle for presentations and discussion, and promised to use the results in its policy deliberations.

Mid 2012, the Happiness Initiative left Sustainable Seattle, and became the Happiness Alliance, a separate non-profit organization to continue the Happiness Initiative but with a national orientation. The survey design underwent several re-

visions and tests, supervised by the Personality and Wellbeing Laboratory at San Francisco State University. This included greatly expanding the set of questions to gain exhaustive coverage of items that contribute to happiness, and then factor analysis and correlations to reduce the questions to a practical number, and employing a five-point Likert scale (www.happycounts.org/survey-methodology) . The questions were organized under ten happiness domains, including the following:

• Mental Wellbeing: optimism, positivity, purpose, sense of accomplishment

• Material Wellbeing: financial security, meeting basic needs

• Work: productivity, achievement, autonomy, sense of fair payment for services

• Time Balance: sufficiency of time to complete tasks, leisure time, enjoyment of activities

• Community: volunteer time, safety, trust in strangers

• Social Support: family and friends, feeling lonely, cared for or loved

• Health: energy levels, performance of everyday activities, exercise

• Governance: confidence in government, involvement, influence

• Environment: access to nature, pollution, conservation and preservation efforts

•Education, Arts & Culture: access, participation and spectatorship sports and cultural activities (www.happycounts.org/the-domains-of-happiness/)

Additional questions inquired into "Overall Satisfaction with Life: Satisfaction with Life and Affect (How you feel)." This provided a basis for relating responses to questions under each of the domains with overall happiness. A reported 25,560 people took the GNH survey between March 2011 and September 2013, and while not randomly selected, respondents live in all of the states in the US and demographic data was collected that permits some assessment of the representativeness of this data, referred to as the GNH Index scores (www.happycounts.org/aboutthesurvey/). Averages on a scale of 0 – 100 for all other respondents are presented and individuals are invited to compare their comparable score to these(www.happycounts.org/grossnationalhappinessindex/). The ten happiness domains or life domains contributing to happiness are also used as the framework for an effort to develop indicators that can be used to report on local conditions as they affect happiness. While considerable effort was invested in identifying valid metrics under each of these ten categories, the need to employ available data sets resulted in awkward and incomplete in portraying the content of each domain as defined earlier. A tool proposed by this current version of the Happiness Initiative involves asking how well a policy or program design accomplishes or contributes to each of the domains, on a scale of one to three, then summing these scores to provide a measure of success in contributing to happiness. This can be misleading since all of the scores are implicitly considered as equally important, which may not be the weight that people would give these items if they were aware that this is a feature of doing an evaluation in this way. In summary, the initial Seattle Area Happiness Initiative and the more recent work of the Happiness Alliance are important initiatives that provide lessons to people considering similar project

in other communities. Using domains as an organizing device, especially for survey design, makes explicit the complexity of dealing with range of factors that contribute to happiness, and employs some of the research discussed in the first section of this paper. But the difficulties in designing valid metrics to comprehensively address these domains are also pointed up. These Seattle initiatives are important early steps in developing a creditable humanistic substitute for the limited and even misleading measurement of Gross Domestic Product.

APPLICATIONS OF HAPPINESS RESEARCH IN URBAN PLANNING

The purpose of this section is to identify some of the ways in which planning can explicitly contribute to happiness, rather than proposing a model and metrics for accomplishing this. The approach used involves applying research findings about drivers of happiness to issues and topics that urban planning frequently addresses in designing and assessing alternatives. This way, the features of these alternatives that positively and negatively impact happiness can be noted and taken into account. While it is attractive to organize these possible contributions of planning by the life domains described earlier, there is enough cross-over of effects between these categories that to do so would result in repetition. Instead, only four of those domains will be used as a loose framework: environment, community, health, and governance.

Since much of urban planning deals with physical features of the city, the environmental domain provides a useful starting point for identifying some the ways that it affects subjective wellbeing. A significant contributor to happiness is providing people with nice places to live and to work. Planning has long addressed ways of pro-

tecting sensitive actives such as residential areas from environmental intrusions, including air and water pollution, noise, vibration and odor. In the past, this was done by spatially separating the polluting activities such as manufacturing and major transportation infrastructure, but the current interest in minimizing trip distances and encouraging walking and cycling has changed the focus to controlling these negative externalities at the sources. Reducing time required in commuting, especially to work and other daytime activities, is served by increasing residential densities and developing mixed-use neighborhoods that are transit oriented. Long, crowded commutes detract from subjective wellbeing, and inadequate time for a range of enjoyable activities is among the most frequent responses in happiness surveys (Frey, 2008). Over the last few years in the US, a major segment of the housing market has sought walkable communities that provide close access to shopping, recreation, and jobs, as reflected in the use of "walkability scores" as a major amenity in real estate marketing.

Similarly, attention to the design of street fronts and incorporation of greenery such as street trees provide aesthetic pleasure. This relates to residential streets and especially to community business centers that provide opportunities for people to meet, socialize, and gain a sense of place-identity or community, all of which are factors in increasing subjective happiness. Planning that attends to providing a variety of parks and natural areas serve the human desire for this exposure as well as enhancing a sense of place, community, and recognition. This variety includes large and small vegetated areas, trails, accessible streams, and areas that serve as habitat. Involving residents in projects such as planting parking strips and traffic circles, stream restoration, and rain gardens contribute to community building and

individual agency as well as accessible greenery. Incorporation of public art plays a related role in wellbeing. Installations often serve as landmarks that help people in way-finding, contributes to a sense of place and community pride and identity, and when involving local artists contributes in a tangible way to the cultural community.

An additional way that planning can enhance happiness is to incorporate inclusionary zoning. This involves requiring residential development to include some proportion of units that are affordable to lower income households, often improving access to work and public infrastructure for them and providing demographically mixed neighborhoods. A final item for this partial list is for planning agencies to offer planning games to young people in schools and recreation centers. These games commonly involve building miniature cities with blocks or boxes, providing an experience that increases the participants' awareness of their environment and its assets and limits, encourages their later participation in planning, and can be a source of evidence that can inform planning that takes the preferences and wellbeing of children into account.

Community is a second domain useful in organizing some of the factors that planning should address. Attention to providing social gathering and activity places is important to developing social networks and identity with a place, which are important factors in happiness. These places can be public community centers that are the location of active recreation, classes, and information about useful services, and retail and commercial services centers that often serve as "third-places" where people meet to socialize. Other physical improvements that encourage neighbors to know each other and for an area to be a nice place to live include traffic calming projects such as complete streets, green streets, and speed reduction de-

vices that contribute to noise reduction, security from fast traffic, and sense of place. In growing cities, increasing real estate values that are often boosted by public investment in infrastructure too often results in displacement of lower income residents. Often referred to as gentrification, this has a number of negative effects on the displaced households, including loss of important social and cultural connections, a feeling of powerlessness, and a sense of low social standing. While displacement is a difficult problem for urban planning to solve, it is an important effect to include in designing and evaluating alternative courses of action. Health is both a complex set of issues and an important contributor to happiness: a national poll indicated that it accounts for what nearly a quarter of respondents identified as of major significance (GfK NOP, 2005). A major crossover with the environmental domain is the importance of controlling pollution in its several forms. Encouraging exercise can contribute to health maintenance including weight and blood pressure control, and can be accomplished by providing facilities for safe biking and walking, active sports fields, and other outdoor exercise opportunities. Easy access to activity centers through a connected, grid street system and higher density development are means to this end.

Health concerns include planning for personal security, such as providing effective lighting, open viewing of public spaces and routes, and traffic control that result in safe vehicle speeds are important both in an objective sense, and in contributing to a subjective sense of safety. And planning can contribute to healthy diet by eliminating food deserts in cities, accommodating farmers markets that both provide locally sourced and fresh food and support regional agriculture, and including community gardens such as Seattle's successful Pea-Patch program.

The fourth life domain used here as an organizing device to identify some planning initiatives that can contribute to happiness is that of governance. The planning process should engage the public in all deliberations and decisions, as a means of making the planning responsive to the concerns and preferences of all of the affected parties, and as an exercise in democracy. Having a political voice and a role of agency in influencing what happens in one's city and neighborhood are important to happiness, as are the sense of community, the sense of belonging, and the social networking that can result. Active outreach is a necessary means to accomplishing this public participation, and can result in greater satisfaction with government and with civil and political rights. As noted earlier in this paper, having a sense of personal effectiveness and thus mastery, confidence and competence is a major factor in achieving happiness. This involves a collaborative approach to the planning process rather than physical features identified earlier as important ways that planning can foster happiness.

CONCLUSIONS

The major mission of this paper is to explore our empirically based understanding of the factors that contribute to human happiness and how to use this knowledge to inform urban planning. This is a dimension or area of concern that has not gotten much explicit attention in the past, and is an opportunity for planning practice to be more comprehensive and humanitarian in the scope of criteria that is used in both design and evaluation (Dolan, 2007). A pioneering effort to raise this as a major public issue is the Seattle Area Happiness Initiative, that sought to discover how people felt about their lives and their situations and using this information as a substitute Gross Domestic Product, that does little to provide insight into

the wellbeing of a population. As the review of research on happiness reveals, major progress in this field is recent and the results can be informative to planning. It is hoped that the discussion presented in this paper will encourage others in planning research and practice to embrace enhancing happiness as a major purpose of the field. Next steps include developing metrics that are valid and practical, and designing evaluation frameworks that are useful and widely understandable to compare planning alternatives in terms of their effectiveness in this regard.

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