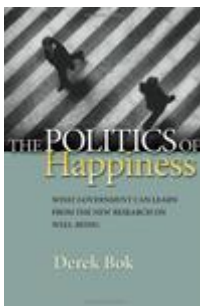


Pursuing Happiness, Sadly

A review of



The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn From the New Research on Well-Being

by Derek Bok

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 262 pp. ISBN

978-0-691-14489-4. \$24.95



Reviewed by

[David M. Reiss](#)

In *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn From the New Research on Well-Being*, Derek Bok has written an excellent treatise that essentially deconstructs “the new research on well-being.” Providing extensive references, and to his credit, critical analysis of research on happiness, Bok has shown that the current status of the study of well-being is at best a field in its infancy, struggling to define both its very subject and appropriate investigative techniques, and at worst a pseudoscience delivering little more than a mixture of rather obvious “findings” and controversial results of questionable validity.

Ironically, just as Bok describes the conclusions of much of the literature on personal happiness, he provides an objective description of the serious problems and inconsistencies within the field while maintaining a rather surprising subjective sense of optimism. The vague quality of many of Bok’s conclusions is demonstrated in his concluding chapter (p. 205), “The Significance of Happiness Research,” in which he writes, “Researchers have

succeeded . . . to devise a way of measuring how happy people are” but that “it is true that many of these findings merely echo what some philosopher or theologian said centuries ago.” Bok acknowledges, “Prominent thinkers have so often disagreed with one another in discussing happiness” but then opines, “The new research does a valuable service by providing empirical evidence to suggest which insights are correct and which seem to be invalid” (p. 205). This book provides a very clear exposition of many provocative ideas and theories, albeit among a paucity of objective evidence to substantiate specific conclusions.

I found much of Bok’s endeavor to relate the study of well-being to political policy disquieting, beginning in the introduction, where he discusses the attempt by the nation of Bhutan to devise sociopolitical policies using “gross national happiness” (as opposed to gross national product) as a yardstick. Bok discusses what certainly might be considered enlightened attempts by the Bhutan royalty to develop a democratized and stable government in conjunction with improved socioeconomic conditions, along with environmental protection.

However, Bok acknowledges that in the implementation of such, “The government has chosen to restrict individual freedom . . . [and] banned the teaching of Nepalese. . . . Unemployment in the capital is high, theft is rising, and drug use is said to be a growing problem” (p. 3). Yet without any detailed discussion of the paradoxical creation of inequity, discrimination, and authoritarianism as “side-effects” of the quest for progress—beyond nodding to the “sheer utopian audacity” of the stated policy goal—Bok offers the quite subjective and quizzical conclusion, “All in all, however, the record of Bhutan remains impressive” (p. 3).

Bok often refers to morality in the discussion of issues such as social justice, fairness, and equality; yet it seems that, objectively, the research in question takes a rather amoral stance in the application of data to political decision making. Bok questions the ethics of policies that might improve the happiness of many at the unfair/discriminatory cost of inflicting pain on others, yet he remains optimistic that political insights may be gained by measuring happiness and well-being, and that hopefully, politicians will be able to wisely integrate data and ethics. Bok is not naïve and acknowledges the inherent (if not inevitable) risks that the application of “well-being research” to politics could be used disingenuously or maliciously; yet perhaps analogous to the Bhutan royalty, his noble intentions do not necessarily bear noble fruit.

Bok provides an extensive discussion of the challenge to researchers to define and measure happiness and well-being. Bok does not shy away from noting the contentious opinions regarding the significance and validity of much of the literature. For example, Bok addresses at length whether happiness should be measured by subjective retrospective report or by moment-to-moment evaluation of mood states, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of both techniques.

However, I am struck by the implied assumption that *happiness* and *well-being* can be considered distinct and unambivalent affective states, totally separate from sadness or

dissatisfaction. Missing is consideration that one might be happy about certain events/ circumstances while simultaneously being unhappy in other regards (e.g., I may be happy and content that I have successfully completed a task, be it personal or professional, while on another level, at the same time, I may be resentful and discontent that the task fell to me—such complexities are avoided by the researchers cited).

From a psychological point of view, I find that two issues deserving consideration are not explored: (a) regardless of their practical circumstances, well-adjusted persons attempt to achieve as much satisfaction/happiness as possible, to “make the best of it”—such that a measurement of happiness does not equate to an evaluation of the value or effectiveness of the sociopolitical policy in question; and (b) emotional satisfaction is often dependent upon the degree to which a person is able to resolve, sublimate, deny, suppress, or act out underlying unconscious emotional conflicts—which certainly complicates the evaluation of whether a specific socioeconomic policy based upon “happiness research” may be successful for the “right” reasons or in the service of dysfunctional dynamics.

It seems that the research in question acknowledges the obvious—that subjective data are not objective—but gives no sophisticated attention to concepts of the following psychological defenses:

1. Guarding against uncomfortable affect,

to the degree to which an individual must constantly guard against the development of potentially threatening inner states, to that extent he/she is forced to exclude perception of outer stimuli in order to prevent them from triggering recognition of his/her inner tendencies (Singer, 1965).

2. Denial and self-deception, on a less psychologically sophisticated level as A .O. Scott (2009, p. M11) described them in an article on recent trends in cinema,

Slumdog Millionaire concerns itself with poverty and disenfranchisement, but it also celebrates, both in its story and in its exuberant, sentimental spirit, the magical power of popular culture to conquer misery, to make dreams come true. . . . The benign faith that dreams will come true can be hard to distinguish from the more sinister seduction of believing in lies.

3. The fact that subjective “happiness” can result from sadomasochistic acting out: as, according to Brenner (1959, p. 221),

By identifying with the feared omnipotent power, and mimicking abusive behaviors, the victim of such mistreatment strives to avoid feelings of helplessness

despair, using his ability to produce failure and to provoke punishment as proofs of magical control of the environment . . . [to avoid becoming] the helpless slave of the environment

or according to Cornel West (2004)

As with the bully on the block, one's own interests and aims define what is moral and one's own anxieties and insecurities dictate what is masculine [strength and well-being]. (p. 7)

Bok discusses multiple sociopolitical issues (mostly, but not limited to, the economic realm), in an attempt to correlate policy decisions with measurements of public happiness and well-being. Policy questions are raised regarding inequality of wealth, financial hardship, provision of medical care, the educational system, and support for social institutions (e.g., marriage and family) as well as the general issue of the quality of government.

Bok provides interesting food for thought, albeit with as many ideas that are simplistic as those that are complex. Some data quoted are counterintuitive, such as findings that economic inequalities do not necessarily determine subjective happiness. These findings are interesting, but they are so dependent upon the definitions of *happiness* and *well-being* as to be of very questionable significance (as Bok often acknowledges) and, in my opinion, often so superficial as to be of little real consequence.

Befitting his reputation as an earnest seeker of social improvement, Bok seems to imply that politically neither rigid, socialistic systems nor authoritarian control befits quality governance. However, Bok remains enigmatic as to how “well-being research” can point to a reasonable stance between these two extremes. As West (2004) said, “The dissonance of being both a person who ardently believes in democratic ideals . . . and a wide-eyed realist about the dispiriting truths of everyday life in America can be alternately enraging, numbing, and crushing” (pp. 66–67).

The Politics of Happiness ponders “what government can learn from the new research on well-being.” After reading Bok’s book, notwithstanding his optimism, I fear the implied answer is “Sadly, not much.”

References

Brenner, C. (1959). The masochistic character: Genesis and treatment. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 7, 197–226. doi:10.1177/000306515900700201

PsycINFO

Article

Scott, A. O. (2009, March 17). Neo-neorealism. *The New York Times*, p. M11.

Singer, E. (1965). *Key concepts in psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Random House.

PsycINFO

West, C. (2004). *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
