



Cultural Influences on Mental Health & Wellbeing in Scotland



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Overview

- What's the problem?
 - Research rationale
- In search of definitions:
 - Mental health, well-being, culture
- A (very) short tour of the well-being research territory
 - Evidence and arguments
- Implications for influences on health?
 - Some conclusions (and critical responses)
 - Invitation to a conversation

What's the problem?

Scotland's health is improving, but not fast enough... healthy life expectancy has been static for two decades... some trends are getting worse e.g. anti-depressant prescribing, obesity, alcohol and drug misuse... This situation has developed during a period of improving material circumstances for most Scots.

The dis-eases of modern life

- Negative aspects of modernity combine to cause certain behaviours and states of mind that are unhealthy in themselves and also lead to the mental, physical and social health problems that afflict Scotland:
 - Economism
 - Materialism
 - Individualism
 - Consumerism
 - Loss of deeper meaning, wisdom and purpose

Research design

■ Stage 1: Conceptualisation

- Conduct a broad literature review to provide definitions of wellbeing and positive mental health & explore evidence of links between wellbeing and culture

■ Stage 2: Fieldwork

- Seek evidence of links between culture and wellbeing in Scottish life using qualitative methods

■ Stage 3: Practical application

- Explore how learning can be applied to Scotland to create a tipping point in Scottish attitudes

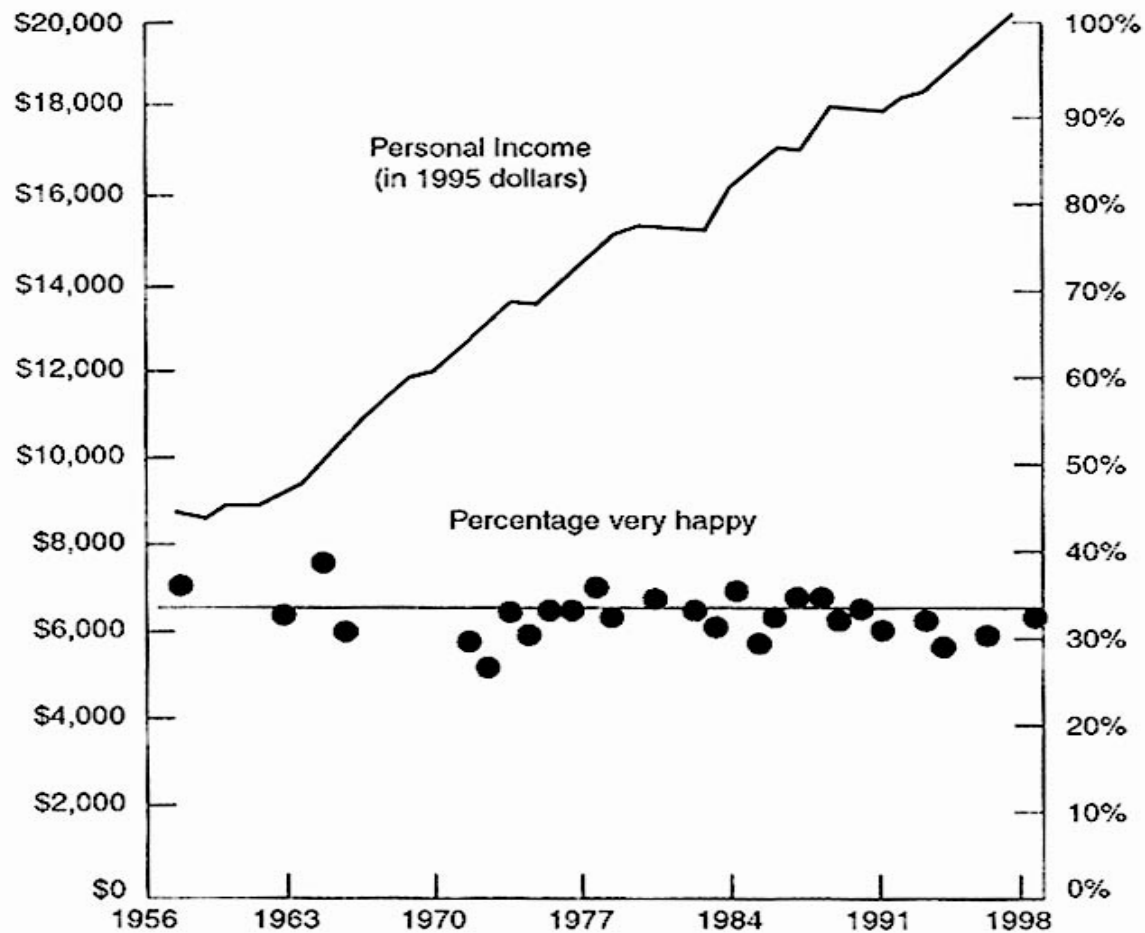
What is mental health?

Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Good mental health is vital to individuals, their families and society.

What is well-being?

“There is no accepted definition of well-being... Theoretical definitions of happiness, life satisfaction, well-being, ‘the good life’ and quality of life have attracted much conceptual confusion... There are as many definitions of well-being as there are people, since it is a matter of personal opinion...”

USA life satisfaction and personal income 1956-1998



(Myers and Diener 1996)

Measures of well-being

- Level 1: transient feelings of pleasure, personal mood (the pleasant life)
- Level 2: evaluative judgements of overall life satisfaction (the good life)
- Level 3: a state of flourishing; fulfilment of one's potential (the meaningful life)

What psychology tells us...

- Wellbeing has a large genetic component (50-80%).
- Human societies have a 'set point' for wellbeing from which there is little real deviation:
 - We can adapt to most things, good or bad (except loss of spouse and job).
- We pursue things that may not make us happy (e.g. wealth, career, social status) because they contribute to reproductive success.
- We are driven by a 'positional psychology':
 - What matters is what others around us have.

Where does 'culture' fit?

- Culture refers to the knowledge, beliefs, values and systems of symbolic meaning that we draw on in everyday life.
 - These shape both how we see the world and how we act in it, though we are not always aware of this.
- Culture is the knowledge we must possess to function adequately in our society.
 - Culture influences the goals we pursue *and* the resources we have available for doing so.
- Our experience of emotional wellbeing is the combined product of biological, social and cultural factors.

“Modern Western culture seems to be based on the very things that are detrimental to health and happiness. An important and growing cost of our modern way of life is ‘cultural fraud’: the promotion of images and ideals of ‘the good life’ that serve the economy but do not meet psychological needs or reflect social realities.”

St Thomas Aquinas (13th Century)

The Cardinal Virtues

Faith
Charity
Hope
Prudence
Justice
Fortitude
Temperance

The Capital Sins

Pride
Gluttony
Lust
Avarice
Sloth
Envy
Anger

The Capital Sins

The Cardinal Virtues

21st Century Consumer Capitalism

“Real blessings under threat!”

- We neglect aspects of life that really matter:
 - love; fellowship; rewarding activity; sources of meaning, commitment, security etc – all jeopardised by increasing loneliness, overwork, too little sleep, poor diet, pressure of socio-cultural expectations etc.
- People are misled by the belief that happiness comes from things.
- Consumerism breeds addictions of many kinds.
- But we can't choose not to consume!

The 'Rules of Happiness'

- Happiness and emotional well-being comes from balancing wants and means and from being content with what we have.
- Happiness is not a goal but a consequence of how we live, found by focusing not on the self, but on others.

Advice from Positive Psychology: 8 steps towards a more satisfying life

1. Count your blessings
2. Practice acts of kindness
3. Savour life's joys
4. Thank a mentor
5. Learn to forgive
6. Invest time and energy in friends and family
7. Take care of your body
8. Develop strategies for coping with stress and hardship

Policy-level recommendations from Happiness Economics

- Promote 'what works' across the population e.g. CBT, mindfulness meditation, the 8 steps etc.
- Don't measure human progress through GDP – measure well-being.
- Limit some human choices and freedoms in the name of well-being e.g. earnings capacity, acquisition of goods, social mobility.

Some critical responses...

- Seeing wellbeing as happiness leads to a focus on developing 'positive' emotions but good mental health requires resilience, coping skills, adaptability.
- Scepticism that a positive attitude can solve complex human problems, whether individual, social or both.
- Well-being research is strongly influenced by specific North American cultural values/cultural script.

- Some policy recommendations appear politically reactionary and authoritarian.
- ‘Modernity’ is a complex phenomenon, providing freedom *and* constraint:
 - In capitalist societies, ‘consumer culture’ is a recipe for a mass identity crisis;
 - But consumption also provides people with opportunities for creating identity and meaning.

Big questions to think about...

- What is it that we think may need to change?
 - Individuals?
 - Communities?
 - Society?
 - Culture?
- What form would change mechanisms take?
 - ‘Inner work’ by individuals?
 - Policies to promote community cohesion and social integration?
 - A shift in contemporary cultural beliefs and values?
- How and why?

Discussion papers: invitation to a conversation

1. Introductory paper: thematic organisation of the literature scan
2. Consumer Society and 'The Good Life'
3. Thinking About 'Culture' as an Influence on Health and Wellbeing
4. The Role of Emotions in Wellbeing: Bridging Biology and Culture
5. Spirituality and Wellbeing: Alternative Salvation in the Therapy Culture?

<http://www.wellscotland.info/publications/consultations4.html>