

The History of Happiness

by Peter N. Stearns

FROM THE JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2012 ISSUE



ARTWORK: YUE MINJUN, THE MASSACRE AT CHIOS, 2001, OIL ON CANVAS, 300 X 220 CM

A modern Russian adage holds that “a person who smiles a lot is either a fool or an American.” It’s true that when McDonald’s arrived in Russia, in 1990, one of its first tasks was to train clerks to seem cheerful. I’ve spent time since with Russian friends, discussing cultural rules on showing happiness, agreeing that differences remain.

The point here is not to disparage Russians. Most East Asian cultures also have lower happiness expectations than Americans are accustomed to. Some Latin American cultures tend in the other direction. The point is that cultural variations on happiness are considerable, contributing to the findings of international happiness polls that dot the contemporary public opinion landscape.

Moreover, attitudes toward happiness don’t just vary; they change. Danes, the current polls suggest, are no longer so melancholy. Exploring the nature of such change not only illuminates our own context for happiness but also allows us to assess its advantages and downsides. Without historical perspective, American expectations seem so normal and so natural that they’re difficult to evaluate.

The fact is that the commitment to happiness in Western culture is relatively modern. Until the 18th century, Western standards encouraged, if anything, a slightly saddened approach to life, with facial expressions to match. As one dour Protestant put it, God would encourage a person who “allowed no joy or pleasure, but a kind of melancholic demeanor and austerity.” This does not mean people were actually unhappy—we simply cannot know that, because cultural

standards and personal temperament interact in complicated ways. But there is no question that many people felt obliged to apologize for the moments of happiness they did encounter. Sinful humanity had best display a somewhat sorrowful humility.

This changed dramatically with the 18th century and the values of the Enlightenment. Alexander Pope declaimed, “Oh happiness! our being’s end and aim!” while one John Byrom urged that “it was the best thing one could do to be always cheerful...and not suffer any sullenness.” The charge here was double-edged and has remained so. On the one hand, it was now perfectly legitimate to seek happiness. On the other, not being happy, or at least not seeming to be, was a problem to be avoided. Ordinary people began writing about their interest “in enjoying happiness and independence.” Disasters, such as the brutal yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793, produced recommendations to the survivors to keep up their spirits and avoid excessive grief.

The list of historians working on happiness is not long, but those who’ve tackled some aspect of the subject generally agree: At the level of rhetoric, at least, a significant shift occurred in Western culture around 250 years ago.

The Rise of Happiness

1776

U.S. Declaration of Independence declares that all men have a right to “the pursuit of happiness.”

1926

The song “Happy Birthday” is composed.

1963

Smiley face is invented; annual licensing fees exceed \$50 million by the decade’s end.

1977

The obvious question is why, and while some causes are pretty clear, we probably still fall short of a fully satisfactory explanation. Components include, certainly, the intellectual shift toward a higher valuation of matters in this world and a reduced commitment to traditional Christian staples such as original sin—all part of the cultural environment created by the Enlightenment. It’s important to stress that the happiness surge was not antireligious; a key component was the new idea that being cheerful was pleasing to God. The 18th century also saw some measurable advances in human comfort for the middle classes and above, ranging from better home heating to the availability of umbrellas to provide shelter from the rain. (Only

a few British traditionalists objected to the latter as undermining national character.) One historian has also noted the 18th century as a time of improved dentistry, when people became

more willing to lift their lips in a smile; he argues that the ambivalent smile of a Mona Lisa probably reflected embarrassment at tooth decay. The several shifts driving the happiness surge were powerful enough to propel happiness into politics by century's end, with the American revolutionary commitment to the pursuit of same.

The smiling American was becoming a stereotype two centuries ago....

Indeed, there seems to have been a bit of an American twist on all this even early on. A British journalist in 1792 was surprised at “the good humor of Americans,” and 40 years later another noted that Americans seemed unwilling to complain, for the sympathy they might gain would be outweighed by their friends' disapproval. It was in the 1830s that Harriet Martineau, often described as the first female sociologist, professed amazement at how often Americans tried to make her laugh: One stranger “dropped some drolleries so new to me, and so intense, that I was perplexed what to do with my laughter.” The smiling American was becoming a stereotype two centuries ago, as a new nation sought to justify its existence by projecting superior claims to happiness. It was no accident that this same new nation, at this same point, quietly revolutionized the approach to death by introducing the garden cemetery, where people could gain a sense of contentment, if not happiness, as they contemplated the end of life.

All of this constituted the first stage in the emergence of modern Western happiness, but there were further stages, building even greater potency into the culture that still claims us. During the 19th century, although the commitment to happiness in general did not escalate, there were important applications to facets of daily life.

The new middle-class work ethic came close to arguing that work should be a source of happiness. There was some complexity here: Horatio Alger stories of the beauties of work also pointed to higher earnings and social mobility—not just intrinsic happiness—as rewards. But it was convenient for a rising class to believe that working people had no reason not to be happy and that laziness and bad habits disrupted not only performance but also contentment.

The happiness surge applied even more clearly to family life. Now that the family began to play a decreasing economic role, as jobs moved out of the home, it took on new emotional responsibilities. Wives and mothers were urged to maintain a cheerful atmosphere in order to reward their hardworking husbands and produce successful children. Moralists told husbands

and wives alike to keep anger away from family life. The rising American divorce rate of the later 19th century owed much to expectations that family reality often could not match—another problem that has hardly disappeared.

Americans also took the lead in efforts to reconcile death with the demands for happiness. The idea gained ground that heaven was a happy place marked by, among other things, blissful reunions with departed family members. This was an intriguing redefinition of spiritual rewards, clearly designed to reduce the need for extensive fear or grief. Its logic, in the context of the ascending culture of happiness, helps explain its persistence in popular religious culture to this day—even to the point where, in a recent funeral service, deceased family pets were assumed to be part of the celestial scene.

With these various developments, the claim of happiness on the culture was established. But the history was still not complete, for there was yet another surge, particularly in the United States, from the 1920s onward. A vast literature began to emerge that stressed simultaneously the importance of being happy, the personal responsibility to gain happiness, and the methods available. Titles, over several decades, included monuments like *14,000 Things to Be Happy About*, *Happiness Is a Choice*, and *A Thousand Paths to Happiness* (with claims that this was an “emerging science”). Targeted programs ultimately included *Happiness for Black Women Only*, *The Ladder Up: Secret Steps to Jewish Happiness*, *Gay Happiness*, and, for the emotional omnivore, *Find Happiness in Everything You Do*.

The push went beyond popular books and articles. The cultural commitment to happiness promoted new efforts to associate work with happiness, through experiments in human relations techniques or just piped-in music. It inspired new workplace standards that instructed white-collar employees and salespeople in the centrality of cheerfulness. It spawned new commercial empires such as the Walt Disney Company, whose corporate motto became “make people happy” and whose employees convinced customers that they were already happy simply because they were in a Disney setting. It prompted “happy meals.” It spurred an advertising executive, Harvey Ball, to create in 1963 the yellow smiley face, which took off even in the wake of the Kennedy assassination and whose annual licensing revenues exceeded \$50 million within the decade. It helps explain another American invention, the laugh track, to assure people they were happy even when comedy fell short. Along with technological improvements in photography, it prompted new standards for public poses, with smiles all around, whether at family outings or in politicians’ mug shots.

The happiness imperative also spread to childhood, another area where cultural norms have become so powerful that it may be hard to imagine historical contrast. Traditionally, childhood and happiness were not generally associated. Again, this does not mean that past children were less happy, but it does mean that their happiness was not obligatory, often not vividly remembered in adulthood, and certainly not any parent's responsibility. Even the Enlightenment turn to happiness did not initially penetrate childhood, where work and obedience continued to hold pride of place. Only in the early 20th century were child-rearing manuals filled with chapters on the happiness of children. Among the exhortations: "Happiness is as essential as food if a child is to develop into normal manhood or womanhood"; "the purpose of bringing-up in all its phases should be to make the child as happy as possible." There was some tension in the new common wisdom between a belief that children were naturally happy (all an adult had to do was not spoil things) and a nagging worry that childhood was actually more complicated (parents had to produce the necessary joy). But there was no dissent from the belief that a key responsibility of parents was to solidify the link between childhood and happiness. Revealingly, by the 1940s the concept of boredom shifted from being an undesirable character trait, which good children should avoid, to presenting a challenge for parents. This was also the context in which, in 1926, the song "Happy Birthday" was composed, becoming a family staple by the late 1930s—despite, or perhaps because of, the gloom of the Great Depression.

The escalation of happiness built on the existing culture, but there were other contributing factors. The transition from a largely manufacturing to a white-collar economy played a role, providing more settings in which managers could see happiness as a business advantage. Consumerism was central. All sorts of advertisers (a newly distinct profession) discovered that associating products with happiness spurred sales. This is what most clearly explains why the intensified happiness culture of the mid-20th century has, in the main, persisted to the present day. We're still supposed to be smiling.

Understanding the happiness imperative as an artifact of modern history, not as an inherent feature of the human condition, opens new opportunities to understand central facets of our social and personal experience. Some undeniable challenges emerge.

The comparative angle is intriguing, especially as elements of the West's happiness culture have been widely shared. "Happy Birthday," for example, has been translated into all major languages, and birthday celebrations are now important in the middle-class consumer cultures of China and

Abu Dhabi, altering or even reversing prior traditions. Will a happiness surge be part of globalization? We don't yet know—remember the less-smiling Russians—but it's a theme worth watching.

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More important, whether globally or nationally: What does the evolving culture have to do with actual happiness? Here, too, it's not easy to say. Some experts argue that happiness is an inborn trait, so urging a person to become happier is like insisting she become taller. This probably goes too far. Cultures that stress happiness likely do produce more happy people, but the link is complex and fragile.

The historical evolution of our happiness culture also suggests limitations. We have seen that the translation of happiness norms into family and work expectations produces frustration and disappointment when experience contradicts cultural hyperbole. When too much is expected, less actual satisfaction may result. New norms might also make it harder to confront experiences, such as death, where happiness is hard to find—another vulnerability of contemporary culture.

The happiness imperative certainly hinders exploration of the gray areas of modern experience, and its compulsory quality can misfire. Here are the two clearest downsides.

First, although the most obvious drawback of the emphasis on happiness involves the gaps with reality that can, paradoxically, create their own discontents, there's also the risk that people will fail to explore reasons for dissatisfaction because of pressure to exhibit good cheer. We may miss opportunities to improve situations, for example in work settings, because we assume that problems result from personality and not from more-objective conditions. Those risks suggest the need to cut through the pervasive happiness rhetoric at certain points.

Second, and at least as important, a culture saturated with happiness makes it difficult for people to deal with sadness, in themselves and others. A sad child is a comment on the parents—the source of that modern scourge, the “unhappy childhood.” But what of children who *are* sad or who go through periods of sadness? What are their acceptable outlets? The same applies to adults. We know that at least a quarter of depression diagnoses are mistakes, confusions of

normal sadness with a pathological state. Indeed, some depression may result from the difficulty of manifesting a more modest dose of sadness, making it “easier” to drift into outright illness. Every cultural system has drawbacks to go with the advantages that facilitated its adoption in the first place. Seeing a culture as the product of historical change is an invitation to step back, assess, and then consider further change. We may not wish to alter the happiness culture that modern history has bequeathed us; its considerable problems may be outweighed by the pleasure of having cheerful artifacts and smiling faces around us. But we can at least consider the possibility of modification. In our happiness culture there might yet be, after a couple of centuries of acceleration, room for improvement.

A version of this article appeared in the January–February 2012 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

Peter N. Stearns is the provost and a professor of history at George Mason University.

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Paul Gibbons 6 months ago

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