THE ORIGINS OF HAPPINESS: A new book on the science of wellbeing over the life course

Schools and individual teachers have a huge effect on the happiness of their children. Indeed, the school that children attend affects their happiness nearly as much as it affects their academic performance.

What’s more, if we wish to predict which children will lead satisfying adult lives, the best indicator is their emotional health at age 16. This is more important than their academic qualifications right up to the age of 25 – and more important than their behaviour in childhood.

These are among the findings of a new book by Professor Richard Layard and colleagues, which presents evidence on the origins of happiness drawing on unique survey data on over 100,000 individuals in Australia, Germany, the UK and the United States.

The Origins of Happiness, which will be launched at the London School of Economics on Monday 22 January 2018 with a public discussion between Richard Layard and BBC broadcaster Andrew Marr, explains how understanding the key determinants of people’s life satisfaction makes it possible to suggest policies for how best to reduce misery and promote wellbeing.

Among the research findings and policy recommendations reported in the book:

- The fundamental inequality between people is the inequality of wellbeing, not the inequality of income. Those who most need help are the miserable, whatever the reasons for their misery.

- There is a clear relationship between income and happiness. But most human misery is due not to economic factors but to failed relationships and physical and mental illness. Even in poor countries, mental illness accounts for more misery than physical illness does.

- Eliminating depression and anxiety would reduce misery by 20% while eliminating poverty would reduce it by 5%. Mental illness deserves a much greater share of resources in every country.

- In European elections since 1970, the life satisfaction of the people is the best predictor of whether the government gets re-elected – much more important than economic growth, unemployment and inflation combined.

- The best predictor of an adult’s life satisfaction is their emotional health as a child.

The authors conclude:

“Public policy needs a new focus: not ‘wealth creation’ but ‘wellbeing creation’.”

“Public expenditure, taxation and regulation should increasingly be based on evidence about how they affect the subjective wellbeing of the people.”

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Nancy Hey, Director of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, added:

"What most of us want for ourselves and our loved ones is to live happy lives."

“Evidence shows us that things like poverty, unemployment and breakdown in social trust do have an impact on our wellbeing. But it's the link made in this research between childhood emotional health and adult life satisfaction that is really striking.”

“To act effectively to improve wellbeing, we must know the relative impact different factors can have at different stages of our lives, and these findings contribute to that understanding.”

ENDS

Notes for Editors:
The Origins of Happiness by Andrew Clark, Sarah Flèche, Richard Layard, Natavudh Powdthavee and George Ward is published by Princeton University Press.

Andrew Clark of the Paris School of Economics is a professorial research fellow of the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP). Sarah Flèche is an assistant professor in economics at the Aix-Marseille School of Economics in France. Richard Layard is founder director of CEP and its wellbeing programme. Natavudh Powdthavee is professor of behavioural science at Warwick Business School. George Ward is a PhD candidate in behavioural and policy sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Sarah Flèche, Natavudh Powdthavee and George Ward are all research associates in CEP’s wellbeing programme.

The book will be launched at the London School of Economics on Monday 22 January 2018 with Andrew Marr and Richard Layard: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/events/event.asp?id=458. Twitter Hashtag for this event: #LSEhappiness

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For more information contact:
Richard Layard (r.layard@lse.ac.uk) or Helen Durrant, (h.durrant@lse.ac.uk).