

## Measuring Happiness is Crazy

Some economists have for the past few decades joined with some psychologists to measure happiness. It gives bosses who like to run other people's lives, as mothers sometimes like to do, and as tyrants in fact do, an excuse, an excuse, a method, and a measure. The King of Bhutan runs his country so.

It sounds wonderful. After all, the purpose of a benevolent mother, dictator, or king should be to make people happy, yes? "I'm from the state, and I'm here to make you happy." Lovely.

The trouble is that the method is crazy. A non-crazy school of "positive psychologists," such as my friend the late Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (we just called him Mike), study happy people and make suggestions for imitating them. Mike spoke of "flow" as the sense of engagement in a difficult task at which you are reasonable good. You forget time, as I do often when writing, or when discussing as I did this week with economists and political scientists the frontiers of "humanomics." But Mike never tried to put a number on it.

The craziness comes with the number. We can number human scope with GDP. But the measure of "happiness" comes from asking you to rate it on a three-point scale. You reply, "Things are going well. I reckon it's 2.5." Then the economist asks your next-door neighbor, who is a pessimist, and he replies 1.5. Then the crazy economist declares the average happiness of your neighborhood to be  $2.5 + 1.5$ , or 4.0, divided by two people. So, 2.0.

But your happiness and his are not on the same scale. Optimistic countries like Brazil score higher than pessimistic ones like Bulgaria. Talking of average happiness would be like measuring today's temperature in São Paulo in Celsius as 25 degrees and in Rio in Fahrenheit as 77, and declaring the average to be  $25 + 77$  divided by two, or 51. Fifty-one what?

Oh, never mind.

And we can achieve such “happiness,” scoring 3.0 every time, by staying high on Aldous Huxley’ soma drug. Crazy.

It’s more than crazy. It’s unethical. As parents we try to arrange soberly for our kids to achieve happiness. Yet a liberal society should not treat adults as children.

No craziness, then, no kings of Bhutan.