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GOVERNING FOR HAPPINESS

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A fair and just society should be the aim for creating maximum societal happiness

According to a survey by jobs site indeed.com, the [average salary for a software engineer in Silicon Valley](#) was US\$134,000 – considerably higher than the average pay even for pricey San Francisco. Throw in the nearly mythical perks of tech firms – on-site barbers, dry cleaning on demand, free buffet lunch spreads etc. – and one would think employees at Google and Facebook et al would be the happiest workers.

Not so. Employee engagement platform TINYpulse found that only 19 percent felt happy in their jobs while just 17 percent felt valued. 36 percent said they see a clear career path, compared to 50 percent for those in non-tech companies.

In [another study](#), researchers in the U.S. found that emotional well-being rises with income but only up to an annual income of US\$75,000. In fact, well-being starts to decline sharply with incomes over US\$160,000.

“We are moving towards the post-materialistic world,” explained **Ed Diener**, Professor of Psychology at the Universities of Utah and Virginia. “What does that mean? It isn’t that money doesn’t matter because we’re all materialistic to some degree.

“Some people say well-being is within you, and you have to meditate etc. That is important but the society in which you live is the biggest factor in terms of subjective well-being, even bigger than other internal things.”

A BETTER SOCIETY, A HAPPIER SOCIETY

Diener, popularly known as Dr. Happiness, made those comments at the recent SMU Presidential Distinguished Lecture titled “*Psychological Well-Being for Public Policy*” where he listed some features of happier societies:

- Economically developed;
- Progressive income tax;
- Human rights protected;
- Low inequality;
- Low corruption;
- Clean air;
- Green space

In light of these features, it is little surprise that Scandinavian countries rank near the top of the happiest nations. But while measures of economic development are objective and highly correlated to higher levels of societal happiness, Diener points out subjective well-being (SWB) – his specialty – as a function of “one’s own evaluation of one’s life”.

“We interviewed lots of people for our research, and we spoke to a rickshaw driver in Calcutta, India called Manoj,” Diener recounted. “He makes about one to three dollars a day. The family can’t always eat. We asked Manoj, ‘Are you happy?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ ‘Are you satisfied?’ ‘Yes, pretty satisfied.’

“How can this be? He says: ‘I really wish I made more income, but my income alone doesn’t define me. I have my kids and wife, whom I love. When I can give them the littlest things, I am happy. I have my friends and religion, I am not defined by my poverty alone.’ Does he want more income? Or for his kids to get a well-paying job? Of course he would! Just because people in Costa Rica are happier than people in South Korea doesn’t mean they wouldn’t want to have more income.”

Diener was referring to [various studies of self-reported happiness](#) in which Costa Rica ranked among the world’s happiest countries despite a per capita GDP of just US\$10,625 in 2015 according to the World Bank. In contrast, South Korea’s per capita GDP of US\$27,222 puts it in the top 30 richest economies but its citizens are among the least happy in the world. So are there public policy initiatives that maximise societal happiness across cultures and countries?

“If you measure 165 countries over any metric, there will be things that are compatible and there will be things that aren’t,” acknowledged **David Chan**, Professor of Psychology at SMU during a discussion after Diener’s lecture. “The concept of well-being is compatible: Did I get what I want? If my wants and preferences are met, I am satisfied. I think that concept is compatible across cultures.”

With regard to rising global income inequality and resulting social tensions, Chan emphasised the importance of lived experience instead of focusing on measures of inequality such as the GINI coefficient.

“We are bothered that it is high in Singapore,” Chan conceded but added: “When you go to the ballot box, you’ll ask yourself: How is my lived experience now compared to five years ago? What is more important is the intra-societal changes over time. Do I have hope as I look ahead to the future?”

“I think the Singapore government has cared about happiness and well-being all this while, but it didn’t use those words because it thought them too fluffy. The government have been using ‘quality of life’ and ‘best interests of Singapore’. They are well-informed of the research and they have access to it.”

He added: “Do people get what they expect? Do people think: ‘If I put in effort, I will get what I expect’? It’s about hope. For those with lower incomes, [it’s about the feeling of] having social mobility – if they work hard they can buy a Ferrari if they so wish. If they do not wish to do so, then they’ll accept it as a personal choice. If people can feel this way, I would argue that you have achieved a just and fair society.”

MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING...AND ACCEPTANCE

Despite a government’s best intentions and efforts, pleasing even a majority of people can often be nigh impossible. Paraphrasing renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, an audience member asked if citizens should change themselves to achieve well-being when they are unable to change their environment or the society in which they live.

“In a Gallup poll, Zimbabwe and Denmark were almost at opposite ends,” Diener answered pointing to the difference in happiness experience by citizens of the two countries. “So to say that conditions don’t matter seems silly. But what happens in the mind is also important.

“A lot of philosophies from 2000 years ago dealt with difficult conditions – people were starving and dying from diseases, you had no control over the environment. Now, we have the ability to also change society. A lot of good has to be within you to some extent, but at the same time it doesn’t mean that politicians can say, ‘It’s all within you so we can do what we want.’ Society does matter.

David Chan: “If you look at studies across countries, the unit of analysis is not the individual but the society. You take the mean. Within a society, conditions are not the same. You do not live the same way as someone who is very rich nor someone who is very poor. Whether it’s between or within countries, lived experiences matter.

“Should we ask people to get used to train breakdowns? I’ll put it this way: Yes, it’s good to be resilient because trains will break down. It is good to deal with failure. But there are tipping points. If I attribute the breakdowns to a lack of good materials, and then it still breaks down when you’ve told me you’ve invested so much into good materials, it matters.

“You’ll lose trust in the authorities’ competence. Therefore, we want to build resilience but also ownership.”