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# On being a happy academic

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# On being a happy academic

**Brian Martin**

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Happiness research provides guidance on what academics can do to increase their satisfaction at work. Changes in external circumstances, such as salary rises, seldom have a lasting effect. More likely to improve long-term happiness levels are exercising well-developed skills, building strong relationships, helping others and cultivating mindfulness. These methods for improving well-being have some specific implications for academic life, suggesting strategies for individuals and policy-making.

## The issue of happiness

Happiness research has boomed in the past couple of decades and has attracted a public following. The findings from this research, when turned into recommendations for individuals, are usually presented as relevant to just about anyone — they are not highly specific to occupations. For example, the finding that expressing gratitude makes people happier is relevant in most circumstances: a person can express gratitude about completing a task, meeting with a friend, taking a stroll or eating an ice cream (Emmons 2007).

Nevertheless, it is possible to develop recommendations, deriving from happiness research findings, specific to occupational groups. Here, I look at implications for academics, a somewhat neglected topic given that most happiness researchers are themselves academics.

I first briefly outline factors that don't have much impact on average happiness levels, with implications for academics, and then turn to beliefs and behaviours that have been shown to improve satisfaction in sustained ways. Implications can be for individuals, academic groups and policy-making.

Like any research field, in studies of happiness there is a huge body of literature and a number of debates and differences. I mostly use findings from happiness

research that seem fairly well established. As well as technical studies in the field (e.g., Keyes & Haidt 2003) and surveys of research (e.g., Diener & Seligman 2004), there are a number of accessible treatments, including ones by leading researchers (Gilbert 2006; Haidt 2006; Lyubomirsky 2008; Ricard 2007; Seligman 2002).

The word happiness can be misleading, suggesting a superficial mood. Closer to the meaning used by most researchers is contentment, well-being or satisfaction with life. A person can be deeply happy in this sense without jumping for joy.

## Genetics and circumstances

As a rough rule of thumb, researchers say half a person's happiness level is determined genetically, 10 per cent affected by external circumstances, and 40 per cent by beliefs and behaviours that can be changed (Lyubomirsky 2008). Those unfortunate enough to inherit a low 'set point' for happiness can look at the glass half empty and rue their fate or look at the glass half full and make changes to increase happiness. Whatever the role of genetics, there is nothing much to do about it. (In principle, staff could be recruited according to their set points, an unlikely and ethically problematical prospect.)

External circumstances include salary, climate, good looks and material possessions such as cars and houses, among other things. The research finding is that these factors make little ongoing difference to personal happiness levels. A classic study examined lottery winners who initially were ecstatic but within a few months had reverted to close to their previous happiness levels. Indeed, following their lottery wins, ordinary activities like having breakfast were less satisfying than before, because they did not compare in intensity to the thrill of the win (Brickman *et al.* 1978).

The basic process that limits ongoing satisfaction from changes in external conditions is called adaptation: people get used to their circumstances and before long revert to their set points. This is also called the hedonic treadmill: people keep striving for material things to make them happy

but end up in the same place. This process applies to things like new cars, new bodies (cosmetic surgery), jobs and promotions.

Although adaptation limits the benefits of improvements in the standard of living, it also protects against serious losses.

People who became paraplegics or quadriplegics initially were very unhappy but after a number of months were found to be nearly as happy as before (Brickman *et al.* 1978). Changes in income, house size, objective measures of health, education and so forth have effects on wellbeing, but they are quite a bit smaller than other things that people can do.

Most people systematically misperceive what will make them happier. Although increased income brings meagre happiness benefits, people keep striving for higher-paying jobs and do not readily learn this is not making much difference to their satisfaction with life.

Academics are widely said to be not all that materialistic because they could, supposedly, obtain higher salaries by entering another occupation, a claim that applies to some disciplines more than others and even then only to some individuals. However, most individuals compare themselves mainly to those closest to them, for example comparing their houses and cars to those of nearby neighbours — the proverbial Joneses — rather than those across town. So academics are more likely to compare their own salaries to those of colleagues rather than those of hairdressers or media magnates.

For many academics, rank is more important than pay: the status of being a full professor is more important than having an expensive car and plush house. Within a discipline such as physics or philosophy, internationally oriented academics are usually concerned more about their reputations than their salaries or ranks.

In terms of life satisfaction, preoccupations with salary, rank or scholarly reputation make little difference. Yet the quest for money and status dominates the lives of many: some make incredible sacrifices to achieve tenure and promotion, find a better job and obtain recognition from peers. At the collective level, academic unions and professional associations commonly seek higher salaries and more funding for universities. Figures show that a doubling of income per

capita in a developed country makes little difference to average happiness levels — the society becomes richer but people are no happier than before (Eastbrook 2003; Frey & Stutzer 2002; Lane 2000). The same most likely applies to academics.

Academic unions and professional associations usually pursue percentage increases in salaries. A different option is to seek equal dollar increases, thereby reducing ratios between salaries. When salaries — and ranks and fame — are more equal, envy is reduced. Other parts of academic life would be more salient, in particular those with a possibility of greater satisfaction.

## Beliefs and behaviours

Research shows that the most reliable way to increase happiness in a sustained way is to change one's beliefs and behaviours. Important methods include expressing gratitude, being forgiving, creating and deepening relationships, being optimistic, entering a state of flow, being mindful and helping others. These and other methods can be applied to the special circumstances of academics. Here, for reasons of space, I focus on just a few: flow, relationships, helping others and mindfulness.

### Flow

Mihayi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) named and analysed *flow*. When a person has highly developed skills and

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exercises them at the limit of their ability — but not beyond — they may become totally absorbed in what they are doing, sometimes to such an extent that time passes without noticing it. This intense state of concentration can be deeply satisfying. Athletes absorbed in this fashion call it being 'in the zone.' Csikszentmihalyi found that flow experiences occur in all sorts of occupations and activities, from playing chess to piloting planes.

Doing research is an ideal activity for entering flow. Advanced skills are required and intense concentration is needed at a number of points, such as making sense of data, understanding theory and planning a research project. Even a seemingly ordinary aspect of research, such as reading a research paper and relating it to one's own ideas, may require considerable mental effort.

Flow can be so satisfying that people make great efforts to repeat the experience. Some scholars fit this pattern, devoting every spare moment to their quest. However, some have difficulty setting aside time for research. Urgent administrative or teaching tasks take precedence. Telecommunications technology, including email, the web and mobile phones, has increased the number of potential interruptions and distractions in academics' lives, with the result that entering and maintaining flow is more difficult.

A solution, at the individual level, is to schedule personal research time every working day and, at the scheduled time, turn off phones, email and other distractions, so that it becomes easier to maintain concentration — and, incidentally, to be more creative (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 120). At the level of an academic unit, an innovative policy would be to schedule daily times for everyone to do research. Another option is to respect individual research times as equivalent to teaching: interrupting someone's class is not normally done lightly, so neither should interrupting their research.

Flow is best achieved while doing tasks that are challenging but not too challenging. If tasks are too easy, there is a risk of boredom; when the challenge is too great, anxiety may result. Research can be calibrated to one's skill level: having investigated a topic in depth, it is always possible to go even deeper or to move to a different topic or a grander synthesis. There are not many jobs in which the skill required for extended work can be perpetually tuned to one's abilities. This is one of the attractions of a scholarly career.

There is a problem, though, for research students and junior academics: research expectations can be daunt-

ing, producing anxiety. A PhD thesis is a huge demand at the beginning of a career, as is publishing in top journals as a junior scholar. Early career expectations can cause anxiety and make entry into flow more difficult, a perverse effect given that flow helps to achieve top performance. Individuals can try to cope by trusting that ongoing effort will produce satisfactory results. At a structural level, one solution is to replace the PhD thesis with a requirement to produce a series of papers, an option at some universities.

Many academics — especially in non-laboratory fields — like to schedule research time in big blocks, sometimes a 'research day' once a week, feeling that they need several hours to get into their current project. The risk with this strategy is that the blocks of time are endlessly postponed. An alternative is to develop the capacity to enter the flow state fairly quickly, on a daily basis. People can certainly do this, for example with crossword or Sudoku puzzles, engaging them with full concentration so long as the puzzle is challenging but not overwhelming.

Scholars, after they retire, are much more likely to continue research voluntarily than undergraduate teaching. One reason may be that teaching has less status than research at most universities; another reason may be that entering flow is more difficult while teaching. A common problem is boredom: teaching the same material year after year can become tedious. To increase prospects for continued flow, teachers can set themselves challenges, for example up-dating the curriculum, using innovative teaching methods, or finding new ways to present material and communicate to students. The idea is to turn teaching into a thrilling on-going challenge instead of a dutiful necessity.

Entering flow while doing administrative tasks is an even greater challenge. Again, developing skills and setting challenges is the way to proceed. One reason why flow may be easier with research than teaching or administration is that most scholars spend years developing advanced research skills — through study as an undergraduate and as a research student — but relatively little time to developing skills as teachers and administrators. The greater the skill level in any endeavour, the greater the potential satisfaction from exercising that skill at an advanced level.

### ***Relationships***

Happiness research testifies to the crucial importance of relationships. These can be in the family or with neighbours, friends, work colleagues and in a variety

of other contexts. For many people, having relationships, especially deep and rich ones, is the single most important factor for life satisfaction.

For academics, relationships at work supplement those in other parts of life. In work roles, there are several types of relationships: with immediate colleagues, typically in nearby offices, with students, with peers in the field and with others on campus and in the wider community, including administrators, staff and cleaners. Any and all of these relationships are worth pursuing: initiating, maintaining and deepening. It can be quite satisfying to meet friends while walking across campus or to receive emails from like-minded individuals.

Several sorts of relationships are worth special mention. Research collaborations can be intense intellectual engagements. Co-teaching can be similarly worthwhile. The implication is that you can gain greater satisfaction from research and teaching by seeking and fostering meaningful collaborations — even if they involve more work than doing things by yourself.

Another valuable relationship is between mentors and protégés, the latter sometimes called mentees. Effective mentoring relationships require sharing

and gaining greater understanding of personal knowledge about capacities, goals, hopes and fears — all a solid basis for relationship-building. Mentoring relationships are often thought to be between an older, more experienced mentor and a junior mentee who needs guidance, but these relationships are seldom one-directional. It is also possible to have relationships with an opposite information flow, with a junior partner providing insight into social networking or the latest theoretical techniques, for example. Ageing academics can renew their enthusiasm by seeking mutual mentoring with junior colleagues.

Relationships with students, especially research students, are another potent source of satisfaction. They often have elements of the mentor-mentee relationship.

Relationships do not have to be comprehensive to be worthwhile. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that a friend needs to fill every role, from confidant to supporter, but it is quite possible to have friends who fill just one of many different potential roles, and to benefit from those friendships (Rath 2006). Academic

relationships often fit this pattern. Interacting with a collaborator or student can be fulfilling without the relationship satisfying every need.

To gain the most from relationships, it makes sense to take the initiative to meet people and build connections that are meaningful in the academic context. It is a mistake to assume that relationships just happen. Like happiness itself, relationships require attention and effort.

### ***Helping others***

Research shows that helping others is a reliable way to feel better yourself. Immediate pleasures like eating chocolate are transient compared to simple forms of assistance like helping someone cross the street. A career with regular opportunities to help others is worth a large sacrifice in salary. One study showed that graduates from Cornell Law School were willing to take public interest law jobs at a modest wage in

preference to high-paying corporate jobs, because the public interest jobs involved helping people who really needed help (Frank 1996).

Teaching involves helping students to learn and, beyond this, broadening their horizons and prepar-

ing them for life. To the extent that teaching actually does this, it is more satisfying. The implication is that you should design and run your classes to accentuate the helping dimension.

However, there is a qualification to helping. The psychological rewards from helping can decline if the process becomes routine. Too much helping — for example, caring for a family member with Alzheimer's — can cause burnout and depression. So it might be optimal to help students to help themselves or each other.

Helping others can also occur through research. The implication is to pick research topics that have a connection to social welfare rather than only career advancement. This need not be finding a cure for cancer; it might also be building safer bridges or providing insight to readers of Jane Austen's novels.

Another arena for helping is professional service, for example serving as an editor, referee or an official in a professional society. Then there is so-called community service, for example giving talks at Rotary clubs or

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joining the board of a welfare organisation. Some roles outside academia are quite separate from academic activities, but often there is a connection, via skills developed in teaching or research. Community service has the spin-off benefit of building wider support for universities (Hall 2007).

In summary, academic work potentially provides numerous opportunities to help others, most obviously students, but also wider constituencies through research and service. Being oriented to helping is a counter to the usual self-interested preoccupation with workloads, status and personal advancement, and is likely to contribute to a greater sense of satisfaction.

### **Mindfulness**

Many scholars in the humanities and social sciences talk about reflexivity, or sometimes self-reflexivity, which usually means being aware of one's own situation or role as a researcher. Someone analysing discourse is being reflexive when drawing attention to their own discourse. More generally, researchers are self-aware when discussing their choice of research methods and when reflecting on their own position in shaping ideas within a research area. However, for greater satisfaction in life, a quite different form of awareness is worth cultivating: mindfulness.

The process called mindfulness basically means being aware of your own place in the world (Hanh 1975). While experiencing the world, you are simultaneously aware of experiencing it. This applies both to external sensations and to emotions: you can be mindful of how you feel. Being mindful can heighten pleasures and moderate negative states. For example, being aware of a looming sense of resentment or anger can defuse the negative emotion.

Mindfulness is beneficial in all sorts of situations, from family life to sport; it can be used to improve learning (Langer 1997). To realise the full benefits of mindfulness, continued practice is needed; Buddhist monks can spend decades in the quest.

Mindfulness involves being aware without passing judgement (Kabat-Zinn 1991: 33–34). This form of awareness may be especially difficult for academics to cultivate, because they are so used to exercising their critical faculties; being mindful means stepping back from constant judging. Robert Boice is one of the few advocates of mindfulness in a scholarly context. In his handbook on being a productive new academic (Boice 2000), he advises briefly pausing before beginning tasks, or in the middle of them, to reflect on their

purpose, in what he calls active waiting.

Mindfulness is a way to attain greater satisfaction in life, including academic life. Rather than getting caught up in angst over too much work, interruptions, bureaucratic impositions or interpersonal resentments, being mindful can help scholars step back from the rush of emotions and calmly see to the core of their activities.

### **Redesigning activities**

Two ways to increase day-to-day satisfaction are to choose to do different activities — or to do familiar ones in different ways — and to change the way we think while doing them. Sometimes it is worth seeking creative solutions.

Many academics, if asked to nominate the most tedious aspect of their job, would say marking of assignments. Nothing is more depressing than a large pile of exam papers or essays. Is there some way to turn the task into something more joyful? The tedium of marking might be alleviated by being mindful. Another approach is to reshape the task.

My goal over many years has been to design assignments that are both stimulating for students and enjoyable for me to mark. Gradually I developed tasks that allowed students considerable choice within a framework, so that I look forward to reading their work. Note, however, that developing such assignments requires a degree of control over assessment tasks. It is not a solution for those given piles of exam papers set by someone else.

Another activity often decried by academics is attending meetings, which are often experienced as boring and a waste of time. For those running meetings, the obvious solution is to design them to be stimulating, or at least effective (Maier 1963). For those who must attend meetings run by others, it might be worth suggesting some alternative formats; if this is not feasible, then individual coping is a fallback option. Rather than passive attendance, each meeting can be turned into an intellectual challenge. While simultaneously following what is being said, you can set yourself mental tasks such as counting backwards from 1000 by 17s, planning your next research project, composing a paragraph of text, memorising the position of every object in the room — a technique for strengthening memory (Restak 2003) — or reflecting on positive attributes of others in the room. The challenge is to do this while being respectful of others present.

In fashioning a satisfying academic life, the first

option is to choose activities — research topics, teaching techniques, service roles — with the greatest opportunities for flow, relationships and other contributors to happiness. The second option is to redesign activities to make them more satisfying. The third option, especially relevant for less desirable activities, is to adapt and cope by using techniques such as mindfulness and self-generated mental challenge.

## Conclusion

The job of an academic is one of the best possible in terms of opportunities for job satisfaction. Unlike most jobs, there is tremendous scope for entering the satisfying flow state — especially through research — when exercising advanced skills. Academic work provides opportunities for developing diverse relationships and for helping others through teaching, research and service. More generally, academics have considerable control over what they do, when they do it and how they do it, providing opportunities to shape daily experiences in satisfying ways.

Despite these advantages, many academics seem to spend more time complaining than being thankful about their circumstances. I know of no research about contentment levels of academics compared to workers in other occupations, but informal observation suggests academics are not distinctly different. The reason is that academics, like most others, systematically misunderstand what makes them happy and as a result pursue career advancement and peer recognition at the expense of more satisfying options. Furthermore, few academics systematically attempt to develop mental states, such as gratitude, forgiveness, optimism and mindfulness that have been shown to lead to greater satisfaction.

To cultivate happiness-promoting thoughts and behaviours, individuals can use exercises presented in some of the more practically oriented treatments of happiness (e.g., Lyubomirsky 2008). Working with others on such exercises has the advantages of providing motivation and building relationships. Changing policies and practices is a bigger project; it makes sense to work on these using methods that are satisfying, so the means reflect the desired ends.

Happiness research is still in its infancy but already has solid findings with practical applications. But scholars are not especially noted for studying research findings in fields other than their own, nor for acting on them. Like most people, academics think they know

what makes them happy and are reluctant to change their behaviour based on studies that say otherwise.

Academics, in certain fields at least, are oriented to critique, and some enjoy finding holes in the new 'happiness orthodoxy.' For example, it is easy enough to point out that positive psychology — the label for scholarly happiness research — is individualistic, as indeed is most psychological research. Does this then imply that pursuing the implications of happiness research involves a self-centred search for inner peace while social problems are neglected (Ehrenreich 2009)? This sounds plausible but is inadequate. After all, one of the key findings of the research is that great satisfaction can be gained from helping others, and this includes supporting union campaigns, joining peace organisations and acting against any social problem you'd like to name. Personal happiness is quite compatible with promoting social change.

Critics of happiness research sometimes position themselves as challengers to a new orthodoxy. However, the deeper challenge stems from happiness research itself. The social orthodoxy is the pursuit of money, possessions and status, all part of capitalist consumerism and competitiveness. Happiness research suggests there is more to life than the quest for money, power and status. In today's world, that is subversive indeed.

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