

NOT PERFECT, BUT INFORMATIVE AND INTERESTING!

Review of “How happy can you be” a film by Line Hatland

First Run/Icarus Films, Brooklyn, NY, USA, www.frif.com; mailroom@frif.com
52 minutes/color/2005

Jan Ott, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Introduction

What can you do if you think you are not as happy as happy could be, and you can spend some money? One option: visit the experts around the world, collect their advice, and make a film about your experiences. That is what Line Hatland did. Her film is a summary of happiness research, nicely visualized with a good sense of humour. The film is a pleasant way to make people familiar with happiness research, and watching it together can be a good start for a discussion about happiness as such.

Formula and Content

Line Hatland visits the leading happiness researchers in the world in their own work-environment. Some of those places have beautiful sceneries, like Greenland, where Eskimos answer questions about their emotions and their satisfaction with life. She obviously could only talk to a limited number of happiness researchers, but the selection she made is very acceptable. By highlighting the most typical contributions of the researchers, she creates a rather comprehensive kaleidoscope of contemporary happiness research, brain-research included. Explicitly or implicitly some basic points are discussed, like the validity and reliability of self-reported happiness. The complications of happiness as a national goal are demonstrated in the Bhutanese mountains. Where needed she puts in a decent amount of irony, like in her visualizing of the emotional impact of blueberry Danish, apricot croissant, fancy donuts, and tiramisu cake. She looks at old pictures of some very seriously looking ancestors, somewhat concerned about the role of genetics. She ends up with lots of advice, some practical advice like expressing appreciation for other people, but also some unpractical advice, like becoming an extravert if you are really an introvert. At the end of the film she comes up with fundamental questions: what about possible drawbacks of happiness? Can actual happiness make us complacent and decrease our alertness? And what about our happiness dreams? She is probably still working on her happiness, but she has some useful clues now!

Little imperfections

There are some imperfections in the film. Statements in the film about high happiness levels are based on research in relatively happy nations, and are not representative for happiness in general. A more fundamental problem is the fact that happiness research is usually based on self-reported happiness within nations. People within nations live in similar life circumstances. Important man-made conditions, like physical safety, water supply and health care, are usually organized collectively and similar for all citizens. In the film Sonja Lyubomirsky presents a theory about the relative importance of determinants of happiness. Genetic factors explain 50% of the variation in individual happiness in this theory, intentional activities 40% and life circumstances 10%. The role of circumstances is probably underestimated, because this theory is based on research within nations. Multilevel analysis,

in samples with people from different nations, would be more informative about the relative importance of the determinants in general. Life circumstances, man-made circumstances included, probably explain much more than 10% of individual differences worldwide. An additional complication is the problem that man-made circumstances are products of intentional collective activities. The distinction between intentional activities and life circumstances is therefore somewhat complicated: if we assume -in the extreme- that life circumstances are completely determined by intentional activities, we can simplify the theory about happiness determinants considerably: 50% genetic hard-ware and 50% intentional activities!