Psychology Today

Glenn C. Altschuler, Ph.D., is the dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, and a professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

This Is America

In Hot Pursuit of Happiness

Psychologists and neuroscientists are in hot pursuit of happiness.

Posted May 21, 2018


Along with the rest of us, but after their own fashion, psychologists and neuroscientists are in hot pursuit of happiness. The Journal of Happiness Studies receives far more submissions than it can publish. The “Better Life Index” of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development measures the happiness of countries around the world. Two professors at the

Dean Burnett is a visible happiness scholar. A neuroscientist at the Centre for Medical Education at Cardiff University, Burnett is the author of *Idiot Brain*. He writes a popular science blog, *Brain Flapping*, and continues to appear as a stand-up comedian.

In *Happy Brain*, Burnett draws on studies in neuroscience and interviews with, among others, a journalist, a singer, a sexologist, and a ghost hunter to assess how our homes, jobs, sense of humor, love lives, and familial relationships stimulate activities in the brain that contribute to or detract from our happiness.

Most of the terrain covered by Burnett will be familiar to psychologists. Physical activity, he reminds us, enhances brain function. Attachment to primary caregivers contributes significantly to a child’s happiness. Our brains encourage membership in a group, but also antipathy to members of ethnic or racial outgroups. Laughter reduces cortisol, which decreases tension. The more vulnerable one is to stress, the less stress it takes to cause a breakdown.

Unfortunately, it seems to me, as Burnett identifies areas of the brain that are activated by external stimuli and individual behavior, he does not adequately address foundational issues in happiness studies. Is happiness primarily a cultural or a scientific concept? Is the brain involved in individual variation? Indeed, as Burnett acknowledges, his interviewees “all have found happiness in their own personal way, via the different paths their lives have taken.”

The brain likes “fairness,” Burnett claims, but we often blame the misfortune of others on their incompetence or immorality, while attributing our failures to bad luck or circumstances. Some brain regions compel us to be nice; others encourage an every person for herself approach. The brain, he writes, “will do what’s necessary” to resolve cognitive dissonance about say, our career aspirations and on the job “realities.” Burnett is, alas, also prone to claims – like “loved-up couples are so damn cheerful all the time,” and, as they shut down the brain’s fault-finding tendencies, “nothing seems to bother them” – that are, well, not always true.

And so, Burnett will probably leave many of his readers without useful take-aways. Research for his book has made him “skeptical of those who claim to know the ‘key’ or ‘secret’ to lasting happiness.” Work can make us happy, he indicates, but work-life balance “varies considerably from person to person.” Like decisions to marry late or not at all, or have children, I would add, job opportunities and satisfactions also vary from culture to culture.

“No two people are alike,” Burnett repeats, accurately but not all that helpfully. And what each individual cares about changes over time. What makes people happy, “be it a nice home, family and friends, love and sex, laughter and humor, sporting achievement, a successful career, vast wealth or fame, creating masterpieces or just writing a book, depends on who they are and how their brains respond to these things…. Because of the way we’ve evolved and the world we’ve created around us, there are just so many things that can make a modern adult brain happy.”
Hard to disagree, isn’t it?