“Happiness reminds us that ultimately this is a world of people, of families, of communities all alike – of human beings seeking the same thing. When we grasp this universal simplicity – this sense of a shared planet and shared fate for those who walk on it in a common quest for happiness, well-being, and contentment – the answer to national and global problems will come closer at hand”  HM The King of Bhutan (pp. vii-viii)

With two forewords, one written by His Majesty Jigme Khesar, the King of Bhutan (the first country in the world to start measuring Gross National Happiness, back in 1974), and the other by Professor Felicia Huppert from the Well-being Institute at the University
of Cambridge, you know this is a real heavyweight in the world of positive psychology textbooks. The product of "more than 3 years of work, decades of research, and many centuries of thinking" (p1), the Oxford Handbook of Happiness, edited by Susan David, Ilona Boniwell and Amanda Conley Ayers is the most comprehensive book on happiness that I have come across. Over 1000 pages long, with 79 chapters, over 120 contributors, and weighing more than 4.5 pounds (2 kilograms), this is a book for the serious student, tutor, researcher, and practitioner.

Even more than meets the eye

When it arrived on my desk earlier this year, my first reaction was absolute delight – all these fabulous ideas, research studies, and insights consolidated into one huge volume! As someone with strengths in curiosity and love of learning, it was like being a kid in a sweetshop. But where to start? A quick flick through the contents pages suggested so many avenues to explore it was difficult to choose.

What initially struck me was the sheer breadth of topics covered. You get everything you’d expect in a textbook on happiness, including sections on psychological approaches to happiness, psychological definitions, positive education, happiness in organizations, and happiness interventions, but there’s so much more. There are sections on

- **Happiness in society**, which includes research relating to happiness and geography, consumer societies, and sustainable development

- **Philosophical approaches** including chapters on happiness in early Chinese thought, continental contributions to our understanding of happiness and suffering, and philosophical methods in happiness research

- **Spiritual approaches** including happiness from Buddhist and Hindu perspectives, sanctification, and meditation and mindfulness

While many of the topics covered in this book have already been touched on in other edited positive psychology textbooks, there are many chapters in this handbook that are truly unique.

Why do we need another textbook on human happiness?

The authors’ rationale for this book is that it answers Professor Martin Seligman’s call at the First World Congress on Positive Psychology in 2009 for a *positive social science*, one which unites researchers and practitioners from fields as diverse as psychology, philosophy, education, economics, politics, sociology, health, and business. This has to be one of the first books in the world to do that comprehensively.

We know that Martin Seligman himself isn’t a big fan of the word happiness. In his 2011 book, *Flourish*, he writes of having been saddled with the word and “that awful smiley face” for the past decade, ever since he was persuaded by his publishers to use the title *Authentic Happiness* instead of his preferred title, *Positive Psychology*. The authors of The Oxford Handbook of Happiness deliberate chose the word because it’s an umbrella term that covers diverse approaches to well-being, including psychological well-being, hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, health, and flourishing. The book successfully represents the different research interests, approaches, and thinking of its many contributors.

What else makes this book special?

In addition to the multi-disciplinary approach, state-of-the-art research, and depth of coverage, this book has several other distinguishing features:

- **This is an accessible text**, even its sheer size may initially put some people off. Most chapters are easy to read, and you don’t have to start at page 1 and read it cover to cover. You can dip in and out, selecting the section that most interests you at the
Any downsides?

- **Daring to challenge positive psychology's sacred cows**, and doing it openly. As a new science, it seems odd to suggest that some ideas might already be beyond criticism, but reading this book really brought home how quickly they have taken hold. One such example is the importance of relationships to happiness. I’m sure many of you will be surprised to learn that according to one recent researcher, the importance of relationships to happiness has been *overstated*. Given our general acceptance that not only do other people matter, they matter enormously (yes I love that Chris Peterson quotation too), this assertion is definitely something worth exploring further.

- **There is a strong focus on practical applications**. One section is entirely devoted to happiness interventions and includes chapters on coaching for well-being, Well-being Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Chapters in other sections describe practical approaches to increase happiness, such as well-being curricula in schools, specific practices to increase well-being in the workplace, and changes to social policy. Although not necessarily written as a guidebook for the practitioner, it contains a wealth of ideas for teachers, trainers, coaches, therapists and counselors.

**References**

Images

Dr Susan David (Institute of Coaching, McClean Hospital, Belmont, MA; Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical Schools, Cambridge, MA; Evidence Based Psychology, Cambridge, MA, USA) courtesy of the International Coaching Research Forum

Dr Ilona Boniwell (École Centrale Paris; Positran, Paris, France) courtesy of LinkedIn

Amanda Conley Ayers (Evidence Based Psychology, Cambridge, MA, USA), photo by Caroline Miller.

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Thanks for this review Bridget. I’m typically a fan of the Oxford handbooks, but I don’t think I’ll be getting this one. The cost is a big deterrent, as well as the title. I was surprised to read this in your article: “The authors of The Oxford Handbook of Happiness deliberate chose the word because it’s an umbrella term that covers diverse approaches to well-being, including psychological well-being, hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, health, and flourishing.”

This may sound like an odd question, but is there a standard definition of “happiness” in the field of positive psychology? I had thought that happiness was merely one positive emotion. I don’t see it as the goal of positive psychology at all, but just one path towards well-being – typically association with hedonic well-being, and not so much the others. Perhaps that’s just a reflection of my own path in life, rather than the science.

What does seem incontestable is that books with the word “happiness” in the title are more likely to become best-sellers, and so we get that “awful smiley face” more and more frequently. I have to admit, it puts me off. Perhaps I’m just a sourpuss!

In any case, thanks for the information – perhaps I’ll overcome my reticence and at least put this tome on my wish list.

Hi Lisa

Thanks for your comments. You raise a very interesting point about happiness and its definition. I don’t think I’ve come across one which everyone agrees about, but I’ll keep looking...

I wonder whether there is a difference between how the term is used in the US/Canada and the UK/Europe/rest of the world. Actually I’m quite comfortable with using it as an umbrella term (as it’s used in this book)and I don’t see it as merely one positive emotion. Though that was Seligman’s justification for ‘abandoning’ (authentic) happiness in favour of ‘well-being’ and ‘flourishing’ now.

In the UK we have a movement called Action for Happiness, which is doing a lot of good work to bring about positive social change through promoting all forms of well-being, not just the positive emotion-based/happiness kind.

http://www.actionforhappiness.org/

Warm wishes from the UK

Bridget

PS And no, I’d never say you were a sourpuss!!
This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.

HOT-OFF-THE-PRESS COMMENTS

Judy Krings: Brilliant review, Aren. Sean’s “Mud and Dreams” plastered a smile on my face from the...

Alex Sternick: Dear Ryan, It is so warming my heart to read your testimonial Of course, Singing in Gibberish...

Ryan Niemiec: Dear Alex, I also love singing with my kids in Gibberish! You are a real “treat” for this...

CoolWriter: To tell the truth, we lie almost constantly and every day: from small tricks and hushing up small flaws...

Admin K.H.B.: John, Given that this article was posted in 2009 and the work by Brown, Sokol, and Friedman to...

Ruth Hayes: Nice article. Related to this – a framework for ethical speech that was shared with me and that I...

John: You support a completely discredited hypothesis (Losada Line)?

Thank you Elaine . your review very great

Rebecca: This article really resonates with my personal journey of understanding my own cycles. Thank you for further...

David: As a man, I can say you nailed everything there is to know about men in relationships. In 2 lines! Secret #1:...

robinhoodi: Yeah! Very true, actually I heard about Carin Rockind even in the past that she has taught thousands of...

Lisa Buksbaum: You are both talented and wise.... think of all the lives you’ve enhanced. Twice graced with...

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2. Section I: Psychological approaches to happiness (Chadwick) The first section of The Oxford Handbook of Happiness, 'Psychological Approaches to Happiness,' begins with an introduction by Joar Vittersø (Chapter 2), followed by 8 thematic chapters. This section, like the entire volume, boasts eminent researchers of happiness. The Oxford Handbook of Happiness is the definitive text for researchers and practitioners interested in human happiness. Contributors are established, forward-thinking experts in their fields, resulting in a book that is a commanding and powerful review of the field. Written in a scholarly but accessible tone.

Oxford Handbook of Happiness. Edited by Susan David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers. Oxford Library of Psychology. The Oxford Handbook of Happiness is the definitive text for researchers and practitioners interested in human happiness. Its editors and chapter contributors are world leaders in the investigation of happiness across the fields of psychology, organizational behaviour, education, philosophy, social policy and economics.

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