Conference paper.

“Happiness and Wellbeing: emerging lessons from social science.”

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**Summary.**

In this paper we started by giving some definitions of what people have considered happiness to be. Aristotle stated, *“Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.”* Gandhi stated that *“Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do, are in harmony.”* On April 28th. 1938, the Worktown researchers launched a Quiz to discover what ordinary people from Bolton thought about the concept of happiness. This was one of several competitions they used to try and discover the views of the local populace. The researcher Tom Harrisson had deliberately chosen to study Bolton, renamed as “Worktown,” as *“an emblematic location from which to observe a working class regarded by those outside of it as almost a race apart.”* Some 226 individuals sent in letters in response to the appeal, and most of these also responded to a questionnaire sent out later. Gazely and Langhamer (2013), stated that most respondents came up with a definition of happiness that embraced, “*mental harmony, a peaceful and contented mind and a clear conscience, often underpinned by religious faith or other moral frameworks.”* Some of the individual definitions offered included the following, *“Happiness is the greatest thing in life that money can’t buy,”* and *“To know joy you must know sorrow.”* Respondents were asked to rank order 10 aspects of happiness. The Top 3 were Security, Knowledge and Religion. The bottom three were; Pleasure, Leadership and Politics. The Worktown study of happiness was one of the first scientific studies of happiness. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of happiness, partly influenced by the work of Positive Psychologists and especially Professor Martin Seligman. His original description of happiness looked at the pleasant life, the engaged life and the meaningful life. The latter two being more associated with true happiness, eudaimonia in Aristotle’s term, rather than hedonia. Given this new interest in happiness we were intrigued to compare perceptions of the 10 aspects of happiness from the Worktown Study, compared to contemporary perceptions. A study of 338 Bury College students, conducted in association with Ian Platt, Steven Barnes, Ruqiah Fatima and Lynda Thorpe, produced some interesting results. The most important item was still Security, but the second and third items were Humour and Equality. The lowest ranked items were Authority, Religion and Politics. While we are continuing to analyse results from other studies with older groups, preliminary findings suggest that for them as well, the top three items are Security, Humour and Equality. The bottom three being Leadership, Politics and Religion. It would appear therefore that for people both in 1938 and in 2014, the most important aspect of happiness is personal Security. The biggest change over that period is a marked decline in the status of Religion, from the third most important determinant of happiness in 1938, to the least important determinant nowadays.

Further details from Professor Jerome Carson (J.Carson@bolton.ac.uk) and Sandie McHugh, (S.McHugh@bolton.ac.uk).

Gazely, I & Langhamer, C. (2013) The meanings of happiness in Mass Observation’s Bolton. **History Workshop Journal**, Spring, 75, 1, 159-189.