

Happiness then and now

Sandie McHugh and Jerome Carson describe two happiness surveys from Bolton, 76 years apart

There has been an explosion of popular interest in the topic of happiness in the last decade involving psychologists (Ben-Shahar, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2014) and economists (Layard, 2011; Dolan, 2015). Journalists and headteachers have been getting in on the act (Bormans, 2012; Seldon, 2015). But this exploration of happiness is not a new phenomenon. Here, we report on pioneering research that was conducted in the UK town of Bolton in 1938, which we replicated in 2014 (McHugh & Carson, 2014). We summarise some of the key findings of this research and provide some insights into what made townsfolk happy then and now.

'Worktown' in the 1930s

As far as we can ascertain, one of the first public surveys into happiness was conducted in 1938 as part of the Mass Observation Study and sought to investigate a 'typical Northern industrial town'. Bolton was chosen, though the researchers referred to it as 'Worktown'. The Mass Observation Study was originally set up in 1937 by the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, poet Charles Madge and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. Their aim was to research the everyday life of ordinary people via participant observation, photography and self-reflective expressions in essays and interviews, along with participation in competitions advertised in the local press.

As part of the study, an advertisement

appeared in *The Bolton Evening News* on 28 April 1938: 'You are asked to write simply what you personally think is HAPPINESS for you and yours. Don't bother about style or grammar just write it down.' (This was not the first newspaper to request its readers to write happiness letters. A few months earlier, the *Daily Mirror* had asked if its readers were happy, and if so to write 200 words about their secret of happiness.)

Bolton residents posted their letters to 85 Davenport Street in Bolton, and in return the 226 writers were each sent a questionnaire. It requested information on the respondent's age and job, and asked them how often were they really happy, whether it is easier to be happier at the weekend, in midweek or if it was all the same. What did they think about 'luck': did that have anything to do with happiness? As Blackpool was the main day trip and holiday resort for Boltonians, courtesy of frequent special trains, respondents were to say whether it was easier to be happy in Blackpool or Bolton. Finally they were asked to number 10 aspects of happiness in order of importance: more equality; beauty; leadership and authority; pleasure; security; politics; religion; humour; knowledge; action.

The Mass Observation Study was revived in 1981 after a dormant period from the 1960s. But the data from the letters and the questionnaires were not analysed until the next century, when in 2012 the historians Ian Gazeley and Claire

Langhamer at the University of Sussex investigated the Happiness data held in the Mass Observation Archive housed at Sussex (Gazeley & Langhamer, 2013). Then we re-ran the competition in collaboration with the *The Bolton News* in 2014, providing a unique comparative dataset of the perceptions of residents in Bolton on happiness collected 76 years apart.

In 1938 75 per cent of Bolton residents found it easier to be happier in Bolton than in Blackpool. As one housewife put it, 'Bolton is where home is', whereas a 19-year-old junior clerk preferred Blackpool because of its healthy air and holiday atmosphere. Indeed 'bracing' sea air must have been a welcome change to the smog-infused air that can be seen clinging to the town in contemporary photographs. Although many respondents worked long hours, often a six day week and sometimes in the dirty and dangerous conditions of heavy engineering and mining, the majority of respondents (72 per cent) reported they were equally happy during weekdays and at weekends.

Around 40 per cent of respondents considered that luck was connected to happiness. This could relate to the weekly draw on the football pools, as a 25-year-old hoped to be lucky enough to 'win a little', or to circumstances as a 36-year-old spinner reported that continuous bad luck can bring on depression. A clerical worker was emphatic: 'No! Luck has nothing to do with happiness.'

In the ranking of 10 aspects of happiness, 'more security' and 'religion' were high up the list for many individuals. A 36-year-old milkman ranked 'security' first and 'leadership and authority' as 10, commenting that he was always happy as he 'restricted his desires to his pocket'. A 59-year-old weaver who considered happiness came from a healthy state of mind ranked 'religion', 'knowledge' and 'security' 1-3, with 'pleasure' and 'politics' at 9 and 10. A 44-year-old collier put 'more equality' at number 1 with 'beauty' at 2 and 'leadership' at 10. The top three aspects of happiness for all the respondents were 'security' (a third had placed this at the top of their list); 'knowledge'; and then 'religion'. 'Politics' was ranked at 10, with 'leadership' at 9 and 'leisure' 8.

The top place for security is not surprising when we consider that there was no welfare state in 1938. Contributory benefits were available for workers only when unemployed or sick: for everyone else, there was a form of meagre means-tested allowance. Health care was provided at a voluntary hospital.

references

- Ben-Shahar, T. (2008). *Happier: Can you learn to be happy?* London: The Observer Press.
- Bormans, L. (Ed.) (2012). *The world book of happiness*. London: Marshall Cavendish.
- Dolan, P. (2015). *Happiness by design: Finding pleasure and purpose in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- Gazeley, I. & Langhamer, C. (2013). The meanings of happiness in Mass Observation's Bolton. *History Workshop Journal*, 75(1), 151-189.
- Layard, R. (2011). *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*. London: Penguin.
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). *The how of happiness*. London: Piatkus.
- McHugh, S. & Carson, J. (2014). The changing nature of happiness. *History Today*, 64(12), 4-5.
- Seldon, A. (2015). *Beyond happiness*. London: Yellow Kite.

It would be another decade before the NHS was formed and the welfare state set up. The high placement of 'knowledge' may be due to the desire for learning and understanding. The vast majority left school at 14, and with no internet or TV, knowledge was not as readily available as today. The importance of religion reflects the 200 churches and chapels in the town for a population of around 177,000.

What do the letters from mass observation in 1938 tell us about the perceptions of happiness at that time prior to the Second World War? There were momentous developments on the European stage, with a victory for General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, and the occupation of Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia by Hitler's armies. In their 2013 analysis, Gazeley and Langhamer estimate that less than 1 in 25 of the letters refer to world events. Happiness was mainly to be found in the home and personal relationships. A miner, Joseph Roberts, summed up the main elements of happiness for many Bolton residents



Bolton was chosen for the 1938 survey as a 'typical Northern industrial town', and the survey was repeated in 2014

when he described his homecoming from the pit. 'I see my kiddies and wife I am happy. When I am washed and romp with my kiddies, and when it is weekend and I tip up my humble wage and share with my wife in doling it out and we find we can manage another week we are happy. I am in regular work although it is hard and dangerous but I am happy because I have a contented mind, I can supply the shekles to keep me and mine.'

Indeed, being free of worry and having enough to live on was not taken for granted in 1938, but acclaimed as a cause for happiness. Mrs Taylor wrote 'to be free from worry as you have enough money for a little pleasure and to keep you straight'. Most of the writers did not desire riches and wealth, but they were

concerned about having enough: Mrs Pasquill wrote: 'Money by itself can't buy you happiness, but it makes you happy and contented to know you have enough for all your requirements and a little put by for a rainy day.' She also referred, as did many of her fellow writers, to the central role of religion in her life 'having faith and trust in God'. Mrs Maxwell describes her spiritual quest as 'putting yourself last and being ready to serve others'. On wishing for a world at peace, Mrs Ruston also treasures the love of her family and a few close friends.

'Leisure' town in 2014?

In the 2014 questionnaire 'leisure' replaced 'pleasure' and 'security' became 'economic security' to reflect 21st century change of discourse. (Happiness letters indicated that pleasure meant free time and security did not refer to prevention of crime but to making ends meet.) As letter writing had declined in the 21st century, we left space on the 2014 questionnaire

for Boltonians to express their personal view of happiness.

The web or paper questionnaire was very similar to that of 1938, with the 10 aspects of happiness, frequency, time of week, venue and luck questions. As an additional measure to frequency of happiness we included an enjoyment question and requested respondents to indicate on a Likert scale 1–10 from 'not at all' to 'completely' how much they enjoyed their daily life. To ascertain

the importance of the consumer society, we asked whether happiness was directly linked to material possessions and wealth. *The Bolton News* was pleased to run a 'Happy Week' in February 2014, providing information on the 1938 mass observation along with articles on how to be happy and stories from local residents of their own experiences. This resulted in 489 completed questionnaires from the weblink at the newspaper and paper questionnaires available in Bolton town centre.

Only 'economic security' maintained a place in the top three aspects of happiness in both 1938 and 2014, moving from first to second place. Having enough to meet living expenses is a major concern, regardless of the provision of welfare.

However, the comments from the questionnaires in 2014 indicate that having 'enough' may often be more about being able to afford experiences, such as holidays and leisure pursuits, rather than just enough to eat. 'Good humour' was the top aspect of happiness in 2014, up from fourth, with the importance of 'leisure' also rising, to third up from eighth position in 1938. Thirty-nine per cent of 2014 respondents found it easier to be happy at weekends, compared with only 26 per cent in 1938. Religion dropped from third place to tenth in 2014: although Bolton has 81 places of worship, the town has seen a continual decline in church attendances as has the rest of the UK.

The role of luck remained unchanged, with around 40 per cent of respondents connecting it with happiness. Whereas 75 per cent of 1938 residents were happier in Bolton than in Blackpool, this had declined to 39 per cent preferring to be in Bolton than elsewhere in 2014, perhaps reflecting the importance of holidays. Yet the majority (60 per cent) of those who reported a high enjoyment in daily life were happiest in Bolton and found happiness every day. On the question of the link between wealth and happiness, 77 per cent of respondents declared there was none. The essence of happiness as reflected in the comments was rooted in family, friends, pets, and leisure activities. 'Happiness is simple things like going out for a walk with the dog. You don't need tons of materials things to be happy' (47-year-old employed woman). To a young woman in her twenties, 'spending time with family and friends' brought happiness. 'Having free time and enough money to do what I want' was the choice of a 50-year-old employed male. Other comments illustrate the concern for meeting living expenses with a 39-year-old male citing 'the ability to provide a good standard of living for my family' whilst a 36-year-old woman found happiness in 'having a good secure job'.

Conducting this research has provided us with a sense of how happiness has changed for Boltonians of the 1930s and in 2014. The original 1938 letters have proved to be an invaluable teaching tool, with today's psychology students. They have helped them see how concepts of happiness have changed across the last century, and no doubt will continue to do so.

I Sandie McHugh is an Honorary Research Fellow and **Jerome Carson** is Professor of Psychology in the School of Education and Psychology at the University of Bolton
S.McHugh@bolton.ac.uk