Changing relationships

Relationships are ‘the building blocks of society’ but what is the changing nature of friend and family relationships in modern society?

Sophie Goodchild, Evening Standard

The decline in marriage rates, the increased earning power of women and the fragmentation of traditional communities are just some of the factors that have shaped the character of relationships in the 21st century. Yet the fact is that family relationships between parents, natural children and siblings still dominate. ‘Patchwork’ families made up of new or additional relationships have yet to replace the nuclear family.

But we cannot ignore the fact that society is more fragmented, our working hours are longer and divorce is a reality.

All this has led to a rise in the importance of relationships in 2009, not just within the family but with friends outside. For many, friends are now the new ‘family’ – or ‘framily’, as it is called.

The Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex carried out research into the impact of relationships in the 21st century.

The findings are being published as a book, Changing Relationships. From mother-child bonds to leaving home, this links relationships to rites of passage over the human lifespan. The book also investigates the impact of divorce on income and the impact of money on moving home, the timing of having a family and the break-up of partnerships.

The findings draw on a wealth of social data, including the British Household Survey, which is based on a sample of 10,000 adults.
LIFESTYLEs CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS

In the first chapter of Changing Relationships, Professor John Ermisch and Dr Thomas Siedler investigate a phenomenon known as ‘living apart together’ – or LAT for short. LAT couples have a steady romantic relationship and regard themselves as ‘together’ but do not live at the same address, although in Britain the LAT partner usually lives nearby. Core LATs are young people under 25 who have never married, according to the researchers. But LAT relationships also occur after separation and divorce; one fifth of LATs come from this group. In Britain the LAT lifespan is short: less than four years. This contrasts with Germany where the duration is longer.

A LAT relationship can lead to cohabitation and then marriage but this is more likely with people aged 35 and under. By the time people reach their late 30s, the majority (79 per cent) say they would never choose marriage. What this research highlights, says Professor Ermisch, is that relationships are increasingly informal and an unwillingness to commit is a contributory factor.

He says: “It appears that a large minority of younger people and a majority of older people have no plans to form a live-in partnership, and so for many the LAT partnership may not be a stepping stone to a more conventional partnership, but a substitute for one.”

Changing Relationships also looks at the role of social networks. Not only do these provide us with companionship, they can also open the doors to career success. Michèle Belot says these networks are segregated according to gender. For example, women are less likely to have full-time employed friends and include relatives more in their social networks than do men.

Life events also play a role in shaping these friendship networks. This means women see more of their friends when they are rearing their children, whereas the opposite is true for men. Women also prefer the company of women; women are their closest friends. Yet men choose both men and women as their ‘best mates’.

Leaving home is always a defining moment in our lives and crucial in the transition to adulthood. This transition is made in different ways and these have been explored from the perspective of parental and child income by Dr Maria Iacovou and Lavinia Parisi. They have found that leaving home requires a degree of risk and that money also has an impact. Their findings show that leaving home in the UK occurs early – around the age of 21 for women and 23 for men. But the UK also has a high rate of return to the parental home, a phenomenon known as the ‘boomerang baby’.

One reason, they conclude, could be that the safety network provided by the British welfare state is not as great as in Scandinavian countries. Housing and labour markets both impact on patterns of children moving out of the family home. The researchers also found that social and cultural factors have a role to play in how children leave home. Young people relate differently to their families in different European countries. For some, finding a place of their own is clear cut but for others it involves spending protracted periods living with their parents or elsewhere.

‘Homogamy’, or ‘like marrying like’, is a fascinating relationship trend that has been explored by Dr Malcolm Brynin and his colleagues Dr Simonetta Longhi and Alvaro Martinez Pérez.
Some researchers argue that women today still prize ‘alpha’ males – men with more money, status and power than them. This even applies to high-earning career women. On the other hand, men continue to prefer young, attractive women. But the findings in this book suggest the desire to form a relationship with an intellectual ‘soulmate’ is paramount. Social class is still a factor in finding this soulmate but marrying up (or down) is not so important in modern relationships.

Despite the rise in cohabitation and remarriage, the researchers say ‘like marrying like’ remains a “strong social principle” and those who do not opt for homogamy may risk psychological problems. Dr Brynin, whose research included studying people’s A-level and GCSE results, says: “We see at the individual level... that on average people who marry or partner someone from a different social background suffer higher psychological stress than people who do not.”

But does the impact of ‘like marrying like’ remain strong once a couple marry? People may select a partner on the basis of similar opinions and background. But do couples become less close once they have made a lifelong commitment? Dr Brynin and his colleagues found that in some cases marriage makes homogamy stronger. For example, couples influence each other on political preferences such as backing Labour or the Conservatives. Yet there are limits to the homogenising effect of marriage: couples stop short of ending up ‘similar’.

As Dr Brynin says: “As a result of chance if not of preferences, variety remains the spice of life.”

The most significant relationship for any human being is still that with their mother. The quality of the mother-child bond has a powerful long-term influence on a child’s well-being. If it is good, it is likely to enhance the progress of children during infancy, their psychological development during pre-school and their well-being as adults. The point at which this influence begins has been examined by Professor Ermisch. His research highlights the considerable variation across families in how parents interact with their children. Better educated mothers tend to ‘score higher’ on how they interact with their offspring. During the first three years, mothers who teach their children the alphabet and counting come out top. And those educated to at least A-level standard are less likely to argue with their teenage sons and daughters.

So how does the child-parent bond alter once children have left the family ‘nest’ and how does this impact on the welfare of both? Professor Ermisch has explored this later phase of family ties by focusing on parents over 60 and their offspring. The assumption is that people automatically take responsibility for their elderly parents, but academics have found no compelling evidence to support this assumption, even looking back through history to medieval times (unless, that is, you are a married mother with money). Daughters are more dutiful than sons and often live closer to their parents, especially if there are grandchildren. In return, they are more likely to receive financial or childcare help. Income also impacts on the parent-child bond in later life.

The conclusion, according to Professor Ermisch, is that children who are wealthier than their parents are more likely to support them in old age and see them more frequently. He says: “An explanation for these associations with parents’ resources is that adult children provide more frequent contact and in-kind help to reduce the inequity of well-being if their parents are worse off than them, and higher parental resources reduce the need to make such ‘service transfers’.”

Relationships are “the building blocks of society,” according to Dr Brynin. He says the research is significant in enabling academics to get a clearer insight into how relationships work. And this goes beyond just focusing on the family. He points out: “The reason for the traditional emphasis on the family is partly that the family is a black box. But with better surveys it’s possible to get a higher power of resolution. Together, these give some statistical insight into the modern relationship.”


http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk
WHEN PARENTS CHOOSE THEIR CHILD’S GENDER

COULD THE SOCIAL fabric of countries be destroyed by parents’ ability to choose the sex of their child? According to figures published in state-run Chinese media, considerably more boys are born than girls every year.

As in other Asian countries, notably India, the Chinese have a strong traditional preference for male children. Parents believe that a male child is needed for work and to support them in their old age. But should parents be able to choose the sex of their children?

It is undeniable that technological advances such as ultrasound screening have helped medical staff predict potential abnormalities, such as Down’s syndrome, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anaemia or Tay-Sachs disease. This in turn has provided vital data that has enabled prospective parents to make informed decisions. Another development has been the ability to predict accurately the gender of the child during pregnancy.

While this ability can be hugely important for some, particularly those with family genetics that affect one gender but not the other, there is an ominous downside: parents who want boys can choose to have boys, and those who want girls can choose to have girls.

Research by Professor V Bhaskar at the Centre for Economic Learning and Social Evolution points to the 2000 census in China, which showed normal ratios of between 102 and 106 boys per 100 girls in some areas, but grossly skewed ratios elsewhere – 130 in Guangdong and 135 in Hainan, for example.

In most countries where abortion is legal, sex selection is not. But this law is hard to enforce. If the situation continues, the impact on certain societies could be dire, with an increasing number of men being born to continue the social structures.

At a family level, this will mean fewer grandchildren and childlessness for many men. For society in these countries, it will lead to there being fewer citizens to continue the economic progress of their communities.

The research suggests that there is an argument for more support to redress this imbalance and for policymakers to look at ways by which it may be possible to increase the value of girls and reduce that of boys, possibly by taxing boys and making economic transfers to girls.


IN TIMES OF DOUBT WE STILL TURN TO MUM AND DAD

Advice of parents still considered “the most helpful”

AS PROFESSOR FRANK FUREDI of Kent University says in Culture of Fear: “The worship of safety represents a profoundly pessimistic attitude towards human potential.” Social theorists often tell us, rather gloomily, that we are living in a ‘risk’ society; that the rapid pace of change in the modern world means young people are facing greater and more challenging uncertainties in their lives than ever existed for their parents’ generation.

But research indicates that, despite globalisation, new family formations and more flexible working lives, some things don’t change. Life feels riskiest for younger people, and family and friends remain their port of call in a crisis. Perceptions of, and responses to, risks in life are often very similar between generations.

The Social Context and Responses to Risk Network brought together researchers and academics from universities and research institutes to examine the way people think about risk. Dr Andreas Cebulla from the National Centre for Social Research, and Drs Noel Smith and Line Nyhagen Predelli from the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University, studied how perceptions of social, economic and health risks vary between generations. Their work suggests that, despite social change, people’s perceptions of risk often remain remarkably stable.

A survey of the British adult population reveals that people worry most about health risks and crime. About four in ten expressed concern about becoming seriously ill or being a victim of crime, while about a third were worried about job or

Myth of the cultural elite

WHAT IS IT to be ‘elite’ in today’s society? The media appear obsessed with their own narrow definition of who is ‘elite’ (read: wealthy) and how such people live – witness the success of The Sunday Times Rich List, now in its 18th year.

Yet there is no such thing as a ‘cultural elite’ in society, according to research undertaken by Dr Tak Wing Chan and Dr John Goldthorpe at Oxford University as part of the Cultures of Consumption research programme. They concluded that there is little evidence of an elite that aspires to ‘high culture’ while turning its back on popular culture.

Many people from more advantaged social backgrounds are not frequent consumers of high culture, while those who are show no tendency towards rejecting popular culture. The researchers identified several types of culture.
income loss, mortgage or rent arrears. Between 15 and 20 per cent were worried about divorce or separation, or having to take on care responsibilities.

People worry less as they get older, though concern about the risks of crime and accidents peaked among the under 25s and the over 65s. Overall, however, the age group that most frequently expressed concern about social risks were the 25-34 years olds. This was particularly the case with respect to employment, accidents or illness.

Among younger people who had experienced job or income loss, ill health, or any of the other risks, the researchers found that many had turned to their family and immediate friends for help or advice. They did not do so exclusively, and often also consulted work colleagues or public advice agencies. The support they received from family and friends was almost universally judged to have been the most helpful to them.

The researchers followed up the survey with an inter-generational study to explore how parents and their children managed seeking and providing advice, and how this affected career decisions. They found that both seeking and giving advice were most likely to happen when parents and children acknowledged up front that they did not necessarily share the same attitudes or experiences, but that this did not preclude talking about risk.

Parents tended to reflect on their own experiences and draw on them for comparisons. Those who were familiar with their children’s employment options sought to project their own experiences to the present situation. This was less of a challenge to parents who shared their children’s ambitions or even their experiences. These situations tended to result in advice and actions which were perceived as helpful by both parties.

More challenging were situations when children diverted from a seemingly progressive career path that their parents had pursued and adopted a more experimental approach to finding a job they liked. Several of the younger people interviewed used multiple entry points to the education system, typically not available in their parents’ day, and the more flexible labour market to sample career options, or try sideways, rather than upwards, career moves. Older generations often struggled to understand this. Here the gap between today’s generation’s perception of risk and that of the parent generation was at its widest.

When parents and children were closest in social class, educational background and income, they were most likely to share risk perceptions in areas such as career decisions. Even when these perceptions differed, the gaps that existed might be bridged when parents and children explored the options together.

The idea of risk has penetrated most aspects of society. Public policies expect citizens to be pro-active in looking after their needs and security and less reliant on a cradle-to-grave ‘nanny state’. But reality is rather different. The risks and opportunities facing young people are more challenging than before, but informal social networks, in particular the family, are as important as ever as sources of support and guidance.

http://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr/index.htm

consumer groups in society. The ‘univores’ are people only interested in popular culture, the ‘omnivores’ consume a variety of different types of culture; the ‘paucivores’ consume a limited range; and the ‘inactives’ are not active consumers of any kind of cultural output.

The work took into account the backgrounds of the people surveyed, including education, income, social class and social status. To ensure that the findings applied internationally, survey data was studied from the UK and also from six other countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

In the UK it turned out that the consumption of culture is clearly patterned, though not along social class, once education and social status are taken into account. Univores composed the largest category for music consumers (65.7 per cent of the sample), followed by omnivore ‘listeners only’ (who listen to a range of music but rarely attend live musical events – 24 per cent), and omnivores (18.3 per cent).

Univores were also the largest consumer group of theatre, dance and cinema (62.5 per cent of the sample). The rest were omnivores (37.5 per cent). For the visual arts (for example, art galleries, festivals, video art presentations) three types were identified: inactives (58.8 per cent of the sample), paucivores (34.4 per cent) and omnivores (seven per cent).

There have been a number of theories put forward to explain how people’s tastes in cinema, theatre, music and visual arts relate to their position in society.

“There’s little evidence for the existence of a cultural elite who would consume ‘high’ culture while shunning ‘popular’ cultural forms,” said Dr Tak Wing Chan.

“It is education and social status, not social class that predict cultural consumption in the UK.”

http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/researchfindings/CofC_Findings_Ghan02.pdf

http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/researchfindings/CofC_
WHEN I GROW OLD I WILL WEAR PURPLE – AND JOIN THE ZIMMERS?

The differences between the young and the old in their cultural tastes

As I grew older, I noticed a shift in cultural activities. Some activities, such as going to classical music concerts, the opera or going to places of historic interest, but it also applies to reading books, DIY and gardening.

The third most important, but not very frequent, pattern is exemplified by textile crafts, which only become more significant among older age groups. All the activities with this pattern can be done at home – an important feature for older people who may be less mobile or less inclined to leave home.

What exactly causes these differences between age groups? The answer to this is only easy at first glance: we all grow older during our lives and, with that, the activities we engage in change. But this is only a small part of the story, says Dr Scherger.

Will the younger age groups watch fewer cinema films when they are older? Will a bigger proportion of them start going to exhibitions and doing textile crafts when they are old?

The Zimmers, whose lead singer is 91, launched their 14-track debut album Lust for Life at a Berlin shopping centre

People’s finances, job and social class influence which activities they like, want to participate in, and can afford. Older people are on average poorer, and many have had less access to education, an important factor in explaining age differences in cultural participation. It is important, too, how highbrow or lowbrow an activity is, and how far physical or mental health or any special abilities are necessary to do it. It also matters whether an activity is carried out alone or must be carried out with others, whether one has to leave home for it, what kinds of equipment are required and how hard it is to organise in terms of time, mobility and social

BY THE TIME they are four, poor children are likely to have heard 13 million words. For a child from an affluent home, the number is 45 million. The government frequently cites this statistic to justify its approach to early-years education and to underscore its determination to eradicate childhood inequality. At the same time, newspapers leap on reports that a large swathe of young people in Britain cannot read.

Despite the growing numbers of young people in Britain who are acquiring A-levels, there are regular headlines in the nation’s newspapers reporting the numbers of young people leaving school who are ill-prepared to cope in a work environment. Its view is that achievement is declining.

There can be little doubt that reading is one of the most vital key skills for everyone. After all, illiteracy is a major barrier to social and economic inclusion. But the capability to read involves far more than just knowing what the actual words are. Ten per cent of primary school children are classified as ‘poor comprehenders’, according to Professor Kate Nation and Professor Dorothy Bishop at the University of Oxford. This means that while they may be technically able to read the written word, they still lack the ability to fully understand what it means.
contact. All these things affect how many people can engage in an activity. And, of course, many are connected to one’s age and position without being determined by them. An example is the increasing rate of physical illness and frailty with older age.

For younger people, what often dictates their taking part in an activity is whether they have children, and so need a babysitter, or whether they are influenced by their parents. Household and living arrangements are important: children usually live with their parents, young adults often live alone; at a certain age, many couples have children in their household, and at advanced ages the number of people living alone rises again.

Finally, and intertwined with all these things, education and the way a person is exposed to activity through their social life has an impact. Younger people do not engage in some activities because they did not grow up with them, like crochet or sewing. Older people may not be interested in an activity, like playing computer games, that only emerged when they were older and already relatively fixed in their attitudes and preferences.

http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/documents/wp55.pdf

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FOOD: WHY CAN’T WE CONTROL OUR APPETITES?

WHAT IS IT that makes people eat more food than they actually want? Are some people ‘programmed’ to eat more than others? Are some people predisposed to fuel the obesity epidemic that now colours all national debates about health?

Research says that consumers are surrounded by the smells and sight of food every day and that these food cues affect their appetite; that they can spark a desire to eat the food even if the person is not actually hungry.

The study says that food cues stimulate overeating, and suggests that some individuals are more affected than others by these cues, which is what leads to problems.

The research findings are important because they could influence future policies on how Britain combats obesity.

In the UK alone it is estimated that one in five men and a quarter of women are obese, and that as many as 30,000 people die prematurely every year from obesity-related conditions.

Dr Jeffrey Brunstrom at the University of Bristol looked at how food cues – the smells or sights that lure us towards certain dishes – affect the amount of food a person intends to eat, how much they actually eat and also their sense of being full.

The study confirmed that exposure to food cues did influence how much food a person intended to eat before a meal. Surprisingly, food cues increased the appetite not only for the specifically ‘advertised’ foods, but also for other, ‘non-cued’ food.

But although food cues increased both the appetite and ideal portion size, they did not increase the amount of food the participants felt they were able to eat.

In a second phase of the research, Dr Brunstrom examined how overweight and normally-weighted people of the same age react to food cues, and found some intriguing differences.

Although normal and overweight participants ate similar amounts, the overweight participants did turn out to be more influenced by food stimuli. They experienced a greater desire to eat. They also salivated more after being lured towards certain food. The overweight participants were also lured into planning to consume larger meals.

The different effects of food stimuli on overweight and normal-weight individuals have not been reported previously, but they could have an influential bearing on government policies to combat obesity.

http://psyweb psy.bris.ac.uk/people/jeffbrunstrom.htm

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The research says that children with weak spoken-language skills early in their development will show poor reading comprehension later.

Another potential cause is exposure to certain words. Even adults will acknowledge that some words in the English language are troublesome. A child who is not exposed to a large vocabulary in their home environment is not given the opportunity to absorb words and their meanings. If words like ‘chaos’, ‘enough’ or ‘daughter’ are not part of a spoken vocabulary, given their complex spelling, it is likely to be difficult for a child to understand them when reading.

Given the growing reliance on a knowledge-based economy, common sense suggests the need to address this issue as a matter of priority, the research says.

http://psyweb.psy.ox.ac.uk/lcd/Early%20Reading.htm

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http://psyweb.psy.ox.ac.uk/lcd/Early%20Reading.htm
HAPPINESS: HOW BEING A MAN OR A WOMAN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Gender differences in what makes us happy

Most people strive to be happy. Such is the importance of happiness to personal and society well-being (the Government has even appointed an unofficial happiness ‘tsar’) that social scientists have increasingly turned to the analysis of what makes people happy. Their research often shows that material gains improve well-being only temporarily, while positive changes in people’s family lives are associated with long-term increases in happiness. Most people agree that there is more to the ‘good life’ than money, but what is important for one’s personal well-being might differ between people.

A team of researchers at the University of Cambridge, as part of the Gender Equality Network, investigated how perceptions of what is important for one’s own quality of life differs between men and women in Britain.

The analysis was based on a large-scale survey that asked people about their perception of quality of life in 1997 and 2002. They found that both genders rank health, family and finances highly, but men place greater importance on finances and employment than women. Women, on the other hand, value family, friends and home comforts more.

Older people keep their social network alive, with women more in touch with family, while men have more contact with friends, according to a study by Dr Philip Haynes at the University of Brighton.

Dr Haynes examined social networks among older people, and their implications for social care services, using data from the 2001 International Social Survey programme. Eighteen OECD countries were included in the study, and regional differences became apparent. Respondents in southern and eastern European countries tended to have more contact with their families than northern and western European respondents. The latter group was generally more involved with friends and social organisations, while having less contact with family.

Japan was also included among the OECD countries, and the pattern there was different.

Still social after all these years

By analysing and classifying people’s surnames and first names, Onomap provides a series of snapshots of population distribution in London according to ethnic origin.

At a glance

Material gains offer only short-term benefits in well-being. Long-term increases in happiness derive from positive changes in people’s family lives.
One survey respondent stated: “I haven’t got any quality of life at the moment as my husband has Alzheimer’s.” Another respondent notes: “If you’ve got your health that’s all that’s important.”

The importance of one’s family declines at old age. Children have long since flown the nest and had children of their own. At the same time, the role of family in one’s life changes significantly. Young people mainly consider their families as the providers of moral and material support, but as they start to form their own families, women often refer to their children’s well-being. Men focus more on being able to provide for their families as the main breadwinner. Contrary to the common belief that society is becoming more and more materialistic, those who consider finances to be important for their quality of life mostly refer to “having enough money not to have to struggle”. The Cambridge researchers did not find evidence that people in Britain are dreaming of winning the lottery or other unattainable goals.

Why do perceptions of quality of life change as people get older? The analysis revealed that people often reassess what is important in their life after key life events, such as having a baby or finding a long-term partner. In one example, a 29-year-old man first described quality of life as “being able to go out and enjoy yourself”. Five years later, after the birth of his first child, he focused on “being with my family; they keep me happy; make me laugh”.

For many people the transition into partnership and parenthood led them to re-evaluate their priorities and focus more on those close to them.

http://www.genet.ac.uk
FOR AT LEAST two hundred years, people have asked of a society ‘how happy are its people?’ and likewise of a policy ‘will it make people happier?’ Until recently, there was very little scientific information to answer these questions. But in the past few decades, things have changed radically, mainly due to progress in social surveys, in psychology and in medical science.

With a few important exceptions, most of the best work has been done in the United States. With a view to launching a major research programme in Britain, Professors Richard Layard and Paul Dolan convened a workshop on happiness research at the Centre for Economic Performance in October 2008.

The programme would combine fundamental research and applied work on the effectiveness of different policy interventions, and include researchers from economics, psychology, medical science, philosophy, politics and sociology. It would exploit the vast mass of unexploited data on happiness as well as collecting new data, both experimental and non-experimental.

The opening presentation at the workshop was by Professor Daniel Kahneman of Princeton University, who is a pioneer in this field of research and the only psychologist to be awarded the Nobel Prize in economics, an accolade he received in 2002. Afterwards, Romesh Vaitilingam interviewed him about how we should go about understanding happiness (or ‘subjective well-being’) as an indicator of social progress.

RV You make a distinction between living and just thinking about it – and between our ‘experiencing-self’ and our ‘remembering-self’. Could you explain these ideas and their significance for happiness research?

Daniel Kahneman We keep insisting that there is one notion of happiness or well-being. I argue that we need at least two. One measurement you obtain when you ask people how they feel right now – I call this experience happiness. Another you obtain when you ask people how they think about their life – this is life evaluation.

It turns out that experience happiness and life evaluation have very different determinants and very different consequences. They are both legitimate parts of well-being but we need to look at them separately.

RV You also talk about the focusing illusion. Could you explain this idea?

DK What we pay attention to plays a central role in every aspect of well-being. You basically enjoy what you attend to: if you are in a luxury car but quarrelling with your spouse, you are not enjoying yourself. Indeed, you are better off not being in a luxury car when you are quarrelling with your spouse: it does nothing for you.

So attention is absolutely critical for your experiencing-self. What you are paying attention to is also critical when asked about your life – your remembering-self. And finally attention is critical when you are thinking about life in general or about any aspect of life. Most of us exaggerate the importance of almost anything as a determinant of happiness. We think that living in a good climate is great, we think that having a high income is wonderful and so on. But in fact people who live in a good climate very rarely think about it.

The focusing illusion is that when we think about people living in a wonderful climate, say in California, we make a terrible mistake. We imagine somebody in California who is thinking about living in California and enjoying living in California because it is so special. But the amount of time that people in California spend doing that is tiny and has essentially no impact on their well-being. We need to understand this focusing illusion and we need to think about the different aspects of well-being. And we must give up talking about one notion of well-being and saying that it doesn’t matter how we measure it. It matters a lot and different measurements lead to very different conclusions.

RV So this must have implications for how we use surveys to find out about people’s happiness?

DK Absolutely. Each survey will direct your attention to different aspects of life. For example, if you ask people to place themselves on a ladder of life in which ten is the best life you can have and zero is the worst life you can have, they give
you a very objective assessment of their material circumstances. And whether they are in Togo or Denmark, people seem to apply the same standard for what is a very good life.

But asking people ‘how satisfied are you with your life these days?’ is different. You are asking them ‘what emotions do you have when you think about your life?’, which is not the same thing as ‘what emotions do you experience when you are living?’ And it is not the same thing as the judgement they make about where they fit on the ladder of life. Each question focuses people’s attention on different aspects of well-being.

RV Presumably this has implications for the way we treat people’s unhappiness and the way we think about public policy trying to make people happier?

DK Certainly. The question is which kind of happiness are you most interested in promoting and developing: is it the happiness of the experiencing-self or of the remembering-self? The interventions of positive psychology are basically designed to make people more satisfied with their lives. That can be very good, but it is not the same thing as making them happier as they live.

Another significant issue for policy is that when we focus on experience, we are drawn to focus on misery, and rightly so. Some people in society suffer much more than others: mentally ill people and people with physical pain suffer dreadfully. Focusing on physical pain and depression as objectives for policy is a direct consequence of one way of thinking about well-being.

RV Do we have enough data at the moment to be able to distinguish between the determinants of experience happiness and of evaluated well-being?

DK This line of research is developing very rapidly. We know, for example, that aspects of material well-being are extremely important to life evaluation. When you ask people to evaluate their lives, they don’t think of their spiritual well-being primarily, they think of their material well-being.

On the other hand, we know that the emotions that people experience within a population depend a great deal on social relationships. For example, people are much happier if they spend a lot of time with other people.

People in a nation are also happier if they believe they can trust strangers. We know this from the lost wallet experiment, where you drop a wallet with an address enclosed and see whether the wallet is returned. There are large differences between countries in the likelihood that the wallet will be returned, and these are correlated with the national level of corruption and with the national level of experience happiness. Countries where the level of trust is higher at any given level of GDP tend to be happier countries.

RV What do you see as the big questions we need to address in happiness research?

DK It is very clear at the moment that the interface of well-being research and health research is one absolutely critical area. Research is going to make major advances over the next decade in understanding the determinants and the complicated connections between the happiness of the remembering-self, what we think about our life, and the happiness of the experiencing-self, and the consequences for our health.
LIFESTYLES OPINION

Exercise, diet and obesity
HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO MOVE MORE AND EAT BETTER

ALMOST ON A weekly basis, the press is full of reports of the increasing prevalence of obesity and the impact this has on diseases such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. These diseases are a global public health problem, not just because they seem to be more prevalent in socially disadvantaged individuals and in certain ethnic groups, but because they are likely to be most problematic in the populations that are least well positioned financially to deal with their medical consequences.

Although close control of blood glucose levels in people with established diabetes can reduce the risk of complications, a complementary strategy would be to prevent the occurrence of the disease in the first place. Fortunately, clinical trials in various different countries have demonstrated that the risk of progression from a high-risk pre-diabetic state to diabetes itself can be halved by a programme focusing on dietary and physical activity change. These trials tell us that diabetes is preventable, but the major question is how to set about trying to prevent it in real life.

One strategy, already underway in some European countries, is simply to roll out the methods used in these trials. The problem with this approach to prevention is that, by design, it focuses on the relatively small group of people who are at the highest risk. Although this is sensible for clinical trials in which selection of high-risk individuals is a necessary design feature to enhance statistical power, the approach is not ultimately an effective public health strategy.

Attention needs to be placed on understanding what determines population-level physical activity and dietary behaviour

There are many risk factors that have a similar relationship with future chronic disease. Geoffrey Rose, in his seminal book on the strategy of preventive medicine, showed that for this sort of risk factor, it would be important to consider the alternative approach of trying to shift the overall distribution of the risk factor in the population as a whole.

It may seem paradoxical, but most of the future burden of a chronic disease, such as cardiovascular disease, that is attributable to higher than desirable levels of any risk factor, such as blood glucose, comes not from the small number of individuals with very high levels of that risk factor, but rather from the bigger group of people who have moderately elevated levels. This is the situation we face with the key determinants of diabetes and obesity, namely dietary and physical activity behaviours.

Most of our research attention has been focused on developing and evaluating individual-level interventions aimed at high-risk individuals. This is an effective approach for those individuals, but it is not likely to impact on the public health problem, for which alternative public health solutions are required.

As a complement to individual approaches, attention needs to be placed on understanding what determines population-level physical activity and dietary behaviour and understanding the effectiveness of interventions aimed at whole populations. Some of these interventions may be planned and may therefore be amenable to more traditional forms of evaluation. Other interventions may be introduced for reasons other than health promotion, but their impact on health-related behaviours may be evaluated as natural experiments.

Research funding for population-level prevention efforts has traditionally been limited and unco-ordinated. In an important effort to try to reverse this situation, a collection of research funders co-ordinated by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration and the ESRC have developed plans for a series of Centres of Excellence in Public Health Research. Our centre in Cambridge brings together groups from the Medical Research Council and the Universities of Cambridge and East Anglia with expertise in physical activity and nutrition, epidemiology, public health, health geography and health economics.

This Centre for Diet and Activity Research (CEDAR) will study the population determinants of these key behaviours in four age-defined programmes: infants, children and adolescents, working age adults and retired people. In a study in Norfolk, we have been researching the characteristics of schools and environments that are related to physical activity in children. A greater degree of understanding about these determinants will provide the logical foundation for future planned intervention studies.

But not all interventions can be planned in this way. The recent award of £50 million of lottery funding to the Connect-2 initiative to enhance the connectivity of walking and cycling networks in 79 sites throughout the UK has presented us with a fantastic opportunity to evaluate whether and how such schemes impact on health-promoting behaviour. In an innovative project funded through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, a team of investigators including a group from CEDAR in Cambridge will be measuring this impact.

These examples not only highlight the difference in approach to the individually focused clinical interventions, but also demonstrate the diverse scientific disciplines that have to be brought together to tackle contemporary public health problems and the wide range of funding bodies that enhance public health research. Only through co-ordinated research action can we hope to generate potential solutions to our public health challenges.

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