Happiness to my four-year-old daughter is telling me this joke and watching my reaction: “Why did the banana go to the doctors? Because he wasn’t peeling well.” It never fails to raise a laugh, and has become something of a party piece for her.

Happiness should be a laughing matter, of course, but it is also a serious business. The question of how individuals can attain their personal nirvana has engaged philosophers and priests for centuries. And in acknowledgment, what makes the nation feel good should be incorporated into government thinking. Early in his term as party leader, David Cameron said we should focus not just on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but on ‘GWB’ – general wellbeing. And the current administration has been the first to appoint a ‘happiness tsar’ to advise it how to inject ‘pep’ into policy.

The creation of the role for economist Lord Layard marks a step change: for the first time senior policymakers are taking a scientific rather than philosophical approach to the issue. Politicians have recognised the value of ‘happiness economics’, which uses the tools of social science to explore the relationship between wealth...
SOCIETY IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

and wellbeing. With the advent of the worst recession for 70 years, it has taken on a new edge. Using questionnaires to gather data on how happy people perceive themselves to be, economists can generate fascinating maps of contentment across continents. And to counter criticism that this process is too subjective to be scientific, they are increasingly augmenting their findings with studies of such physiological indicators of wellbeing as blood pressure. The findings have often proved counterintuitive. Understandably, there have been questions about how reliable such surveys can be, given the elusive nature of happiness. Nevertheless, similar results have been obtained from scores of differently worded surveys across the world, bolstered by important research by organisations like the ESRC Centre for Longitudinal Studies, which has mapped the progress of 17,000 people over five decades.

A strong consensus has emerged that key elements of happiness include financial stability, physical and mental health, job satisfaction including a large degree of autonomy, and strong relationships with friends and family, including within marriage. Some of these we can do little about, especially in the midst of a recession, but others we can improve.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, to all but the most ascetic holy men, the research overwhelmingly indicates that while money might not buy happiness, it can certainly help. This truth is pithily expressed in an anonymous quote used by Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics at Warwick University: "Those who say that money can't buy happiness don't know where to shop."

This translates into the international sphere: according to one ‘Satisfaction with Life Index’, Scandinavia and Canada come first in the contentment stakes, with Britain and the United States not far behind. Bringing up the rear are Russia and large parts of Africa.

The findings also suggest, however, that mere wealth is not sufficient in itself to create happiness: countries that provide their citizens with economic and social stability as well as a good standard of living can outstrip their richer but more turbulent counterparts.

Less obviously, researchers have found that once people earn enough to cover their basic needs, being richer does not make them much happier. In fact, the tendency we have to compare our wealth to that of our peers can make us feel relatively poor, even though – on any objective scale – we are wealthy. The same seems to be true for nations. Although the United States has become hugely rich in the last 50 years, surveys have found that its citizens are not much happier now than they were in the 1950s.

Lack of money, however, is the root of all evil, or at least misery, the research has found. Unemployment, for example, not only diminishes your wealth, but can eat away at your sense of security and self-esteem.

Academics like Professor Oswald argue that this research should be used to modify traditional economics, which is primarily geared to wealth creation. This argument raises all sorts of important questions: for example, would we be happier if governments unapologetically used taxation to reduce joblessness and iron out inequalities in society? It can also have a practical influence on policy. Lord Layard has spoken about limiting long-term unemployment by introducing a 12-month work guarantee scheme – something the government is now working on, and covered by Professor Paul Gregg’s research (see page 28).

The remote mountain kingdom of Bhutan has taken this one stage further, becoming the first country to swap the normal measure of financial growth, GDP, with a Gross National Happiness index (GNH). As a result, it has limited...
deforestation and required tourists to spend at least $200 each per day.

Such thinking is gaining support in Britain. Professor Oswald said: “Do we need to go up to four cars each? Broader measures of wellbeing will likely assume greater importance as the decades pass – and the rise of the green movement is one indicator. Before I retire, I expect happiness surveys and job satisfaction surveys to have become a central part of British life. The ‘News at Seven’ in the year 2020 will perhaps feature the country’s monthly wellbeing score.”

One way of enhancing our wellbeing is to be in control of our money, however little of it we might have at the moment. Research by Dr Mark Taylor, from the Institute for Social and Economic Research, found that increasing financial capability from low to average levels decreased anxiety and depression by up to 15 per cent (see page 28).

Of course, there is far more to happiness than money. One intriguing phenomenon being explored by researchers is the link between people’s wellbeing and their age: irrespective of their financial and domestic circumstances, individuals report being happiest when they are young and when they are old, and reaching their lowest point in middle-age – creating, ironically, a graph in the shape of a smile.

One still unproven theory that may explain the middle-age dip is that mid-life is the point when people let go of unrealistic ambitions: for the young, all possibilities are open, but it is in middle-age that people confront the frustrating fact that they are not going to achieve all the dreams they harboured in their youth. Disappointment can become depression. Coming to terms with life’s realities can be a painful process, but eventually acceptance and contentment surface.

Some of the comments by 50-year-olds in Now We Are Fifty, a report from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies’ National Child Development Study, appear to bear this out. The study is following the lives of around 17,000 people born in 1958. Though 50-somethings did complain about employment opportunities and declining health, they also felt that they benefited from self-confidence, wisdom and experience. One remarked that the advantage of being 50 was: “Knowing who I am, what I want out of life – having enough wisdom to know how to achieve it.”

In terms of the factors that generate the most happiness, however, the study shows that gains in some areas are offset by losses in others. While educational opportunities, equality between the sexes and individual wealth have improved, social mobility and family stability declined. The collapse of marriage is one of the most marked social changes over the last half century. Moreover, the study highlights the fact that the mental and physical problems faced by adults are often rooted in childhood.

Nevertheless, there are some areas in which we can help ourselves, whatever our backgrounds. For example, the amount of exercise we do has a clear link with our wellbeing, yet more and more of us prefer a couch-potato existence. The 25th British Social Attitudes report, published in January 2009, found that people who take frequent exercise were more likely to be ‘very happy’ (35 per cent) than those who do little (28 per cent). While more than 90 per cent of us confess to watching TV at least once a week, only half of us take exercise. This is despite the fact that 23 per cent of us admit to deriving hardly any pleasure from television.

One of the report’s authors, Alison Park, said: “Efforts to promote different ways of spending our free time could well be beneficial.” And swapping an hour in front of the TV for a jog does not just produce a short-term sense of elation. There is growing evidence that people who view the world in a positive way can actually exert a positive influence over their physical health; in other words, if you are happy you live longer.

So is there an upside to the recession? Many think so, arguing that it gives us an opportunity to re-evaluate our lives, and to invest less in material possessions and more in the aspects of our lives that induce happiness and prolong a contented existence. Perhaps we can all develop our own GNH index?

As I write, my daughter’s banana joke is still doing the rounds; when she is a little older I will tell her one of my own: “Two antennas met on a roof, fell in love and got married. The ceremony wasn’t much, but the reception was excellent.”

http://www.andrewoswald.com
http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk
http://www.natcen.ac.uk/bsa
http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk

Despite the link between exercise and happiness, many of us opt for a couch-potato lifestyle.
The role of Christianity today
DESPITE A DECLINE, CHRISTIAN CULTURE IS STILL STRONG

While the idea that ‘religion declines in modern societies’ has lost much of its plausibility, certain kinds of religion have suffered a diminution in influence. It is the historic churches of Europe, both Protestant and Catholic, which have taken the hit. Elsewhere in the world Christianity is flourishing – even in the United States. So why is Europe different, and does it mean that Christianity is increasingly marginal in a society like ours?

In Scotland, England and Wales, the level of regular churchgoing has more than halved. It fell from roughly one in ten in the late 1970s to one in 20 in 2005. No wonder, then, that in September 2009 the Church of England launched what was believed to be its first radio advertising campaign. The ad promoted church attendance through a variety of voices reading a rap-style poem, which told listeners: “Don’t look to make no airs and graces, faked up smiles and masked up faces. No need to make no innovation, please accept this as your invitation.”

But the poor churchgoing figures obscure the fact that some forms of Christianity have been doing much better than others. By 2005 more than a third of regular churchgoers belonged to a range of New, Independent, Baptist and Charismatic churches. These churches do not have national horizons and hierarchies like the historic Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic churches. They cater to the individual, and to like-minded Christian brethren. They are more concerned with winning souls for Christ, than with ministering to society as a whole.

The churches’ moral, ritual and symbolic roles in Britain have not yet been supplanted by an effective competitor

It is the link to nation and state that makes the traditional European churches so distinctive. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, they have been bound up with national identity. Each nation in the United Kingdom is associated with its own church (though the Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920, and the chapels became a more important expression of Welsh identity). Even the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches sought national influence once they were granted toleration, situating their main buildings and offices in Westminster, alongside the Church of England.

This leads to an unusual situation in British Christianity today. On the one hand you have energetic forms of newer Christianity (including new African and Caribbean churches) that seek to save souls. On the other, you have the national churches which still see their vocation in much broader terms. They provide spiritual services for all comers; they try to inform the moral conscience of the nation; they provide the setting and symbols for national celebrations and memorials. But the split between the two camps is intensifying: in the case of Anglicanism, it threatens to tear the Church asunder.

At the same time, two other factors are weighing on Christianity. One is the campaigning strength of a secularism that seeks to confine religion to a purely private sphere where it can have no social or political influence. The National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association are strong lobbying organisations. Recent political and legislative changes also impact on religious freedom, while the ‘culture wars’ in Europe between secular liberals and Muslims provides a new impetus.

The other factor is the growth of religions brought to Britain by post-war immigration. Their effect has been to break the religious monopoly that Christianity enjoyed for well over a thousand years, and to call into question forms of national religion, which are not representative of ‘multiculturalism’. The struggles of Sikhs, Muslims and others to gain representation, and accommodation for their religious practices, has diverted public and political attention from the churches.

Together, these developments mean that Christianity in Britain, and particularly the historically-established churches, are increasingly marginalised in British society. The Church of England is beleaguered on every side. Not only is it divided internally, it faces pressure from those who want a fully secular state, and its cultural monopoly has been lost.

On the other hand, 72 per cent of Britons identified themselves as Christian in the 2001 Census, and there is no serious political will for disestablishment, or for the abolition of institutions like faith schools. The Church, meanwhile, gets on with its parish and pastoral work, and continues its campaigns against poverty and for the protection of asylum seekers. It tends its international links, and maintains its national obligations.

An explanation of these ambiguous indicators is that while Christianity is increasingly marginal to many peoples’ day-to-day lives, the churches’ moral, ritual and symbolic roles in Britain have not yet been supplanted by an effective competitor. Most people still want the churches to deal with key events in the life cycle (particularly death), and many still affirm Christian values and want their children educated in a context that confirms them. Similarly, the state wants to take advantage of many of the services that the churches provide, while establishing its secular credentials.

So Britain remains a social scientist’s nightmare: neither religious nor secular, but a bit of both.

http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk
PEOPLE IN THE western world are living longer lives, but does that mean they are living healthier lives? For the first time, those aged 65 and over will soon outnumber children under five, and the focus is shifting to quality of life, not just longevity.

It is not only individual fears for health and wellbeing that have triggered a thirst for knowledge on this crucial issue. There is an acute awareness that extensive and well-funded health and social services need to be in place to deal with the trend.

Dr Domenica Rasulo at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Professor Les Mayhew and Dr Ben Rickayzen, both at Cass Business School, London, have completed a study into how long older people spend in ill-health.

Their research, as part of the ESRC Understanding Population Trends and Processes Fellowship Programme, is using data from the Health Survey for England. They modelled the population of England to determine how much time the ageing population may spend suffering from limiting long-term illness and from diseases which, while not life-limiting, could put a strain on services.

The study looked at life expectancy increases between 1992 and 2004 and showed that with an increase in life expectancy came an increase in the number of years spent with limiting long-term illness.

Dr Rickayzen said: “The fact that increasing life expectancy is accompanied by an increase in time spent with illness has very significant implications for health policy in England. The increase in people who require medical visits, outpatient appointments, prescriptions and hospital admissions will add up to significant increases in costs for the government.

“It is not just the health cost implications that need to be carefully considered. It is also the cost to social services. If more people are living longer, those people will be drawing a pension for longer and there will be a greater demand for specialised long-term care and housing.”

The findings showed that life expectancy for men increased by 1.8 years, of which 1.6 years would be with illness. For females the increase was 1.2 years, with 0.9 years spent with illness. The government has released a consultation paper on reform of adult social care which proposed the introduction of a National Care Service. This system aims to be “fair, simple and affordable for everyone” but has not reached beyond concept stage.

Dr Rickayzen said: “Our findings highlight the importance of the need for the government to implement a specific strategy for the funding of long-term care in England and Britain as a whole. There are very few people who can afford to pay independently for such care from income alone and new sources of funding are required to meet this financial gap.”

Age Concern estimates that more than a million people over the age of 65 currently receive social services from their local authority. Many receive care of poor quality or do not get enough to meet their needs.

“We need to consider all the options for funding long-term care, including suggestions from the private sector,” says Dr Rickayzen.

“There is a window of opportunity for alternatives to be tested and for the private sector to be given their chance.”
Parenting is perhaps the final frontier in the battle for gender equality. Mothers still bear the brunt of responsibility for childcare, and fathers who go against this trend face a hard time, whether at the mother-dominated school gates or in negotiations with employers for flexible hours. But enabling fathers to become more involved is the first step in helping parents achieve a more balanced division of labour in their domestic lives, says Dr Alison Koslowski of Edinburgh University. Dr Koslowski’s research was part of the ESRC’s Understanding Population Trends and Processes initiatives.

Britain has too few family-friendly policies that help permit fathers to care for their children. Not all fathers want to take advantage of the policies that do exist, but for those who do, they are far too limited in nature.

Paternity leave was introduced in Britain in 2003, and fathers are entitled to two weeks leave from work. If a father’s average weekly earnings are £95 or more before tax, statutory paternity pay is paid for two consecutive weeks at just over £120 per week or 90 per cent of average weekly earnings if this is less. This is far lower than the average weekly wage and poorer families will not be able to afford this lost income. For those fathers who want to spend more time looking after their children beyond this short time, there is no further financial provision. Parental leave is also currently available to fathers – and mothers – but is unpaid and comes with conditions attached.

It is little surprise, then, that many couples are still arranging their parenting according to a traditional split in the division of labour. This works for some, but for many it comes with drawbacks. A dramatic change in working patterns has occurred among mothers of young children, with employment rates doubling since the 1970s for those with offspring under five. More than half of mothers are now in work before their children begin school – unheard of a generation ago. But what is the effect on children? That depends on the timing and characteristics of parents’ work and the quality of care children of working mothers receive, say researchers.

Research from the ESRC’s Gender Equality Network is comparing two ostensibly similar countries with very different experiences of working motherhood and children – the United States and Britain. Dr Denise Hawkes of the University of Greenwich and Dr Danielle Crosby of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro are using longitudinal data from both countries to examine the associations between early maternal employment and child wellbeing.

In the United States there is no federal provision for paid parental leave and only about half of all
workers are eligible for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave. By contrast, mothers in Britain were entitled, at the time the project was collecting data, to four months of paid maternity leave and an additional three months of unpaid leave to care for children. Mothers are better able to achieve a balance between home life and work. Couples who share childcare more equally are also less likely to separate, creating a society of more stable and happier families.

Parents in the United States return to work much sooner after giving birth than their counterparts in Britain, with nearly one in five returning to work in the first four weeks. Researchers found that in the United States, it is the more disadvantaged mothers who return to employment sooner, whereas in Britain those with high levels of education return to the labour force at a faster rate than those with less education. Drs Hawkes and Crosby then narrowed their focus to mothers with low levels of education, and examined how mothers’ employment in the first year of life was related to children’s cognitive development at ages three and four. For children in Britain, mothers’ employment in the first nine months of life had no discernible impact on school readiness or vocabulary development. In the United States, however, employment appears to confer some cognitive benefits to young children of mothers with low levels of education, but only when this employment begins some time after their third month of life.

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**AT A GLANCE**

Children born into low-income families in the United States and Britain suffer from inequality and disadvantage from birth, which limits their cognitive, social and physical development.

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More millions of children in Britain and the United States are set on the road to inequality from the moment they are born. This is despite the fact that they live in two of the richest countries in the world. Policies designed to ensure equal access to good schools and jobs are still failing to break the link between family wealth and future success. To make matters worse, a recent UNICEF report placed the two countries at the bottom of a table measuring child wellbeing in 18 advanced countries, and child poverty rates are higher in Britain and the United States than in most European countries.

So what is going wrong? Research shows that disadvantage becomes embedded in the first few years of life. Children from families with low incomes experience environments that limit their cognitive, social and physical development. This means that they begin school with deficits in their learning ability and social behaviour, and struggle to catch up with their more affluent peers, even where schools serve all pupils equally.

A study by Dr Elizabeth Washbrook of the ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation and Professor Jane Waldofogel of Columbia University explored the differences in cognitive and socio-emotional development of more than 20,000 low and higher income children born in the United States and Britain in 2001. They found evidence of substantial inequality in the abilities of pre-school age children. Ranking cognitive development of all children within a country on a scale from one to 100, a child born into the poorest fifth of families is ranked, on average, only 33 in Britain and 31 in the United States. A child from the richest fifth of families, in contrast, is ranked 63 on average in Britain and 70 in the United States. Early inequalities in social development – behaviour problems – are also present, but noticeably smaller than in cognitive development.
MOTHERHOOD IN POST-CONFLICT BELFAST

Belfast once took the brunt of the Troubles. Now, as the city council points out, it is one of the safest cities in the UK and has experienced a cultural and political renaissance. Alongside dramatic improvements in the quality of life, it has one of the youngest populations in Europe – one-fifth of the population is younger than 16 years old.

So is contemporary Belfast no longer any different from, say, Manchester or Bradford? A study by Drs Lisa Smyth and Martina McKnight at Queen’s University Belfast, part of the larger-scale ESRC Conflict in Cities and the Contested State project, explored the lives of 39 inner city working class Catholic and Protestant mothers with pre-school children.

It found that although sectarian divisions remain strong, important changes are evident. Many women now walk into the city centre, some commenting that they are taking routes through particular streets for the first time in their lives. This freedom is, however, limited to the daytime. For those relatively few nights out in town, taxis are preferred, and fear of sectarian attack remains.

But overwhelmingly, Belfast city centre is viewed as a neutral rather than a divided space, and its use is shaped less by concerns about sectarianism and more by ‘ordinary’ urban fears about being mugged or sexually assaulted.

The general stress of visiting Belfast’s newly redeveloped and crowded city centre with young children in tow, on public transport, is also a deterrent, as is the cost of shopping in the centre’s expensive new stores.

Generally, everyday life continues to be lived in local, segregated neighbourhoods, of which respondents are proud, despite well-acknowledged problems such as alcohol abuse, illegal drug use, joy-riding, and recreational rioting.

So in some important respects, Belfast is becoming more ‘ordinary’, as the need to manage potential risk from sectarian attack, for women at least, has declined. But urban segregation, physically marked by the ‘peace’ walls along which many of these women live, is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Indeed, the majority of women, despite acknowledging the lessening of sectarian tensions, did not want to see the removal of these barriers “just yet”.

http://www.arct.cam.ac.uk/conflictincities

THE RISE OF MIXED-RACE BRITAIN

Britain has the largest mixed-race population in the European Union, and this is the fastest growing demographic group in the country. Increasing numbers of people say they are from a mixed ethnic background.

A new study depicts a Britain in which people from both majority and minorities are increasingly likely to marry and have a family with someone from a different ethnic group. Children of such mixed ethnicity partnerships are themselves likely to form relationships with those who have a different ethnic heritage to themselves. So what does this mean for ‘British’ society and is Britain now comfortable with hybridity as a national characteristic?

First, the figures. Research by Dr Lucinda Platt from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, using the Labour Force Survey, said that more people were defining their ethnic group in terms of one of four ‘mixed’ ethnic group categories introduced in the 2001 Census.

The categories were: white and black Caribbean, white and black African, white and Asian or other mixed. Some three per cent of children defined themselves as of ‘mixed’ ethnicity compared with just 0.5 per cent of adults.

Between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, those children with one Caribbean and one white parent increased from 19 per cent to 49 per cent of children with any Caribbean parentage. Children with an Indian and a white parent rose from three per cent to 11 per cent. Among children with a Pakistani parent, the chance of having a white parent increased from one per cent to four per cent and among children with Chinese parentage, 35 per cent had a white parent in the mid-2000s compared with 15 per cent ten years previously.

For those in or forming partnerships, it is younger people who are more likely to form mixed ethnicity relationships. Across the population, ten per cent of 16- to 29-year-olds who were living with a partner were in mixed ethnicity relationships, compared with just four per cent of over 60s.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission said: “Britain is changing in a remarkable way. This is hugely positive and we can afford a moment to celebrate: Britain’s diverse culture is becoming all the more fascinating and interconnected.”

But the findings of the study do not convey a simple message of mutual understanding.
The increased numbers of people in inter-ethnic relationships, who actively want their diverse history and origins acknowledged, complicates and confuses simplistic understanding of race and ethnic categories.

Rates of inter-ethnic partnerships across groups vary substantially, and minority groups face potential losses as a result of the increase in diversity. Rates of inter-ethnic partnership, generally, are higher among minorities than among the majority. But there is still a lot of variation between minority groups. This is partly attributable to the extent to which different groups were likely to have grown up in Britain, and therefore been exposed to other groups.

But even concentrating just on those who have been brought up in Britain, there are still big differences between ethnic groups. For example, ten per cent of Pakistani men and women brought up in Britain and in couples were in inter-ethnic partnerships; around 20 per cent of Indian men and women were partnered with someone from a different ethnic group; and over 60 per cent of Caribbean men and 45 per cent of Caribbean women in couples were in inter-ethnic partnerships.

While the proportions of those defining themselves as mixed white and black Caribbean are approaching the numbers of those defining themselves as black Caribbean, the same is not true for Indians or Pakistanis.

If we regard interethnic partnerships and the children they produce as a measure of diversity, and therefore as reason for celebration, there will be many people excluded from the party who can also contribute to the diversity of the British population.

And despite the diversity among minorities in Britain, around 96 per cent of white British people in couples are with a white British person. So the vast majority of the white British population will have no family contact with anyone from another ethnic group.

Given the dominance of the white British population, minority groups may feel that inter-ethnic relationships can weaken their cultural heritage, reduce sources of community strength and support, and make it harder to maintain community institutions, while not having a noticeable impact on the identity and values of the majority of the white majority.

Dr Platt concludes that “In a country in which colour or ‘race’ remains significant in how people are regarded and treated, being of mixed ethnicity cannot promise to offer protection from the racism suffered by their parents’ generation.”

http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/news/2009/01/19/the-rise-of-mixed-race-britain
ARE TRUST AND RESPECT IN DECLINE?

Such values remain important to people, but young adults feel they miss out

In HIS INAUGURAL address, in January 2009, President Obama rejected as “false” the choice between safety and respect for human rights, and appealed for the trust of the American people. As Britain enters a general election race, the qualities of trust and respect are also at the forefront.

But do people in Britain generally trust each other? Do they think that they themselves are treated with respect?

The 2007 British Social Attitudes survey from The National Centre for Social Research asked members of the public about these issues – and the results challenged some common stereotypes. There was little evidence that trust had eroded over the last few decades. To assess this, researchers included two questions that have been asked in a number of different surveys over the years.

They found that 41 per cent of the public felt that “most people can be trusted”, compared with 43 per cent who took part in a similar study in 1981. Similarly, the proportion who thought that people “try to be fair almost always” or “most of the time” changed little; 56 per cent thought this in 1998, compared to 58 per cent now. So there is little evidence of a long-term decline in trust, although it is clear that low levels of trust are prevalent among certain groups, including the young and those on low incomes.

The 2007 British Social Attitudes survey then turned to the issue of respect. People were asked whether they were generally treated with respect and consideration within a number of settings – in their own day-to-day lives, within their neighbourhoods and within Britain as a whole.

Respondents were much more positive about the levels of respect they encounter within their own lives than they were when asked to think about respect within Britain more generally. Eight in ten (79 per cent) thought everyone or most people in their day-to-day lives treated them with respect and consideration, while 73 per cent agreed that people generally behaved in this way within their neighbourhood. However, when asked to think about Britain as a whole, just 40 per cent felt that people generally treated each other with respect and consideration.

The study suggested that the increasing prominence of respect within media and government communication has created a perception that this is an important concern elsewhere in Britain, even if it is not something that is a problem for individuals personally. While the most deprived groups within society were less likely to perceive respect within their own lives, this was most notably the case for one group which cuts across socio-economic boundaries – the young.

http://www.natcen.ac.uk/index.html
The question comes as Britain faces a fat epidemic, with two-thirds of adults and one-third of children overweight or obese. This is expected to rise to 90 per cent of adults and two-thirds of children by 2050. The trend affects everyone, as it causes ill-health such as diabetes and heart disease and carries a huge price in terms of direct costs to the NHS and indirect costs such as loss of earnings due to sickness or premature death.

Obesity has also been linked to lower educational attainment in children. But how? A study by Dr Stephanie von Hinke Kessler Scholder, Professors Carol Propper, Frank Windmeijer, George Davey Smith, and Debbie Lawlor from the ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation pointed to three ways that childhood obesity could be related to school test scores.

First, obesity could cause lower test scores by affecting child development. For example, obese children may be bullied by their classmates, lowering both their confidence and academic performance. Second, children may over-eat to compensate for doing poorly at school. And third, instead of there being a causal relationship, the association may be driven by other factors that affect weight and school outcomes. A family’s social class may shape both their diet and attitudes to schooling, for example, affecting weight and test scores.

Focusing on the first point, the authors use genetic markers from the ‘children of the 1990s’ birth cohort to examine whether children’s obesity at age 11 affects their Key Stage 3 results at age 14. Genes are spread randomly from parents to children and are unrelated to factors such as social class. Relating this genetic variation in weight to children’s test scores would identify any causal effect that weight had on performance in school.

Using this approach, the authors found no evidence that obesity causally affected test scores. This, they said, suggested that the link between being obese and doing less well academically was driven by the third point mentioned above: that there are other factors that affect both weight and educational attainment.
Supporting families
Children and
domestic violence

Children living in households where their mothers are abused experience considerable distress. ESRC research on domestic violence has directly impacted on the lives of mothers and children by influencing policy initiatives and affecting the design and delivery of support services from local government and charities. The research also provided the basis for the development of educational materials used in direct work with mothers and children.

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The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK’s leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns.
AFTER RUNNING THE gauntlet of fundraisers in the high street or collecting another batch of appeals from the letter box, people may feel there are too many charities jostling for their resources. Many charities, particularly in cancer and international aid, appear to be doing similar jobs. So would a reduction in charities make giving more attractive and the charity sector more effective?

Charities have a powerful presence. Around 170,000 charities are registered with the Charity Commission, the independent regulator of charities in England and Wales, but no more than about two-thirds actively raise funds from the general public. This is equal to less than one-tenth of the number of private businesses in the UK. Gifts and legacies to charities and other local causes (such as school fêtes and hospital appeals) are worth around £16.5 billion per year – a generous amount, but still equal to just two-fifths of national annual spending on alcohol.

In spite of this relatively modest scale, however, the charity sector meets many social needs for which there is no, or little, state or commercial provision. Sightsavers International, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Carers UK and Liberty, for example, provide virtually unique services. Other charities like Leonard Cheshire Disability, Scope, Royal Mencap Society and The National Autistic Society specialise in needs that are often poorly understood within society. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Crisis and Age Concern represent particularly vulnerable people.

The charity sector is growing in significance as a service provider, not only in social care for the most needy, but in health information and care (hospices, for example, are one of the fastest-growing areas supported by the donations of the general public), national and local arts and cultural institutions (for example, the Natural History Museum, Opera North Limited), environmental causes (the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Woodland Trust), benevolent societies and welfare for armed services personnel (Royal British Legion).

This diversity demonstrates charity responsiveness to individual and social concerns, but also presents donors with a wide choice. And research shows that, as in other areas of consumer spending, giving to a charity can involve complex and sometimes difficult decisions. Most people donate to several different charities and must weigh up which charities are the most deserving, effective and cost-efficient, what they can afford (particularly in a recession), whether to give regularly and where their money would add the most value. They may find saying ‘no’ embarrassing. One way of dealing with this is to deny the value of a charity, as some marketing research has revealed, so it is not surprising if people feel some charity requests are unnecessary.

Public concern often focuses on areas such as cancer research and care, or international aid, where competition for funds seems highest. There are at least 140 registered UK cancer charities. But their growth is a particular example of charity response to public need; specialised cancer charities have emerged to reflect our increased understanding of the disease as a set of different conditions requiring different approaches.

Breast cancer charities are the most high-profile example (Breakthrough Breast Cancer, Breast Cancer Care, Breast Cancer Campaign), ensuring dedication of funds to this area, but others have followed, such as prostate, pancreas and skin cancer charities.

Where activities genuinely overlap, charities have taken some steps to reduce unproductive competition. A recent example is the merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged earlier this year. In 2002 Cancer Research UK (CRUK) resulted from a merger of Imperial Cancer Research Fund and The Cancer Research Campaign and became Europe’s largest fundraising charity. But mergers can be complex, expensive and time-consuming, and other kinds of charity collaboration can be equally productive. For example, 13 cancer charities, including CRUK, Macmillan and Marie Curie have together provided funding to the National Cancer Research Institute.

There is also successful joint charity fundraising. The Disasters Emergency Committee co-ordinates the public’s donating to international charities, raising £390 million after the Asian Tsunami of 2004. In a comprehensive fundraising drive BBC Children in Need raised £21 million on one night last November. Charities devote an average 25 per cent of income to fundraising and managing their finances and operations with the professionalism expected by government and the public, but research indicates this has changed little over the past two decades of charity sector growth.

Evidence suggests the number of charities per se is not necessarily a problem – and even a cause for celebration. Many people could afford to give more. There is, however, great potential for charities to work in more collaborative and less competitive ways. Charities could make more use of new media technologies to provide ‘one-stop shop’ online channels for charity information and donating where similar charities could highlight their common concerns and collaborations, as well as difference of focus and costs. This would ease the task for the donating public, and even encourage giving to a sector on which we are increasingly dependent.