Looking at well-being from a perspective of policy

By Glenn C. Altschuler, Globe Correspondent | March 21, 2010

In Aldous Huxley's novel, "Brave New World," the masses are fed feel-good pills, amusements, and the promise of perpetual youth and an end to all sources of discomfort. Into this "utopia" comes a young man, nicknamed "The Savage," who rejects its values. "I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin," he tells an official. "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."

Sympathizing with Savage, most Americans recoil at the superficial pleasure principles of "Brave New World." Nonetheless, they remain in hot pursuit of happiness. The vast majority of them tell pollsters they are "fairly" or "very" content with their lives. Even at the bottom of the economic pyramid, more than 80 percent of Americans profess to be more happy than not.

Psychologists and behavioral economists agree on the conditions conducive to happiness: strong marriages, close friendships, good health, religious faith, and community service. But, as Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard University reminds us in this careful and cogent new book, people tend to be poor judges of what gives them lasting satisfaction. They think that more money, a new car, or a move to California will make them happy when, in fact, the effect of these changes wears off after a few weeks.

In "The Politics of Happiness," Bok acknowledges that levels of well-being in the United States (and other countries) remain quite stable — and that unhappiness will be very hard to reduce or remove. Happiness, he recognizes, should not be the sole end of public policy, trumping justice, civil liberties and equality of opportunity. Bok believes, however, that the American government, which is in no danger of tranquilizing its citizens, can and should design policies to enhance their happiness.

Bok demonstrates that a preoccupation with economic growth — and a doubling and redoubling of the gross domestic product during the last 60 years — has not made Americans any happier. Although average levels of happiness increase as one moves up the income scale, the impact of greater wealth on happiness, even among winners of the lottery, is mitigated by rising aspirations and adaptation to a higher standard of living. In 1975, at a time of stagflation, 74 percent of Americans indicated that their family income was sufficient to satisfy their most important needs. In 1999, at a moment of great prosperity, only 61 percent had the same claim.

Although he recognizes that slow-growth policies are unlikely to be enacted any time soon, Bok wants government officials to draw on happiness research to rethink priorities. Strengthening family ties, improving child care, enhancing job security, reducing illness, depression, chronic pain, sleep disorders, infant mortality, and teen pregnancies, he claims, will do more for well-being than redistributing income, putting more people in prison, subsidizing the already well-to-do, or perpetuating a car culture. In the long run, they might even pay for themselves in increased productivity and fewer (and briefer) visits to the hospital.

"The Politics of Happiness" often reads like a liberal's wish list. In the space of two paragraphs, Bok endorses a higher minimum wage, more earned income tax credits for poor people, career academies in high schools, an end to mandatory jail sentences for drug offenders, public works programs in high unemployment areas, and expanded rehabilitation programs in prisons. Conceding that there is no direct evidence that many of the programs he supports make the recipients happier, Bok justifies his recommendations by citing evidence of the adverse impact of "persistent anxiety about almost anything."

However laudable they might be, Bok’s recommendations for reforms in government, education, and the media are even more distant from happiness. He is in favor of campaign finance reform, independent redistricting commissions to eliminate gerrymandering, and measures to curb earmarks and pork barrel spending. He wants the public schools, which are preoccupied with preparing students for work, to take far more seriously their responsibility to provide the knowledge, interest, and commitment necessary for active civic participation — and a greater appreciation for the humanities and creative arts. And he challenges the media to avoid partisan bias, stop exaggerating the faults of government, and start recognizing its accomplishments.
Bok understands that in a democracy, the power of public officials to increase happiness is limited. He is no doubt right that government can do a lot, right now, to reduce illness, avoid war, and limit financial risk. And that it is much tougher to design programs that will strengthen marriages, social ties, civic engagement, and more active uses of leisure. He may be right as well that if happiness studies are disseminated widely, and a global climate disaster is looming, a public debate might occur over the role of growth and the value of material possessions. The United States, we can guess, will never copy the kingdom of Bhutan and declare “Gross National Happiness” its yardstick for measuring progress. But Americans just might begin to think harder “about how to use our abundance ‘to live wisely, and agreeably, and well.’ ”

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