COMMUNITY ESSAY

Social norms, happiness, and the environment: closing the circle

John F. Helliwell
Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia, 997-1873 East Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1 Canada (email: john.helliwell@ubc.ca); Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, 180 Dundas Street West, Suite 1400, Toronto, M5G 1Z8 Canada

Author’s Personal Statement:

When social scientists and policy makers approach sustainable development, their policy tools usually include a variety of taxes and regulations aimed at influencing economic behavior of the sort traditionally assumed by economists. Such measures are likely to fall far short of what is needed to achieve the required reductions in emissions, do not embody life satisfaction as the desired outcome, and ignore what well-being research has to say about the well-springs of human behavior. In this essay, I present evidence showing how the malleability and importance of social norms combine with the well-being benefits of pro-social acts to offer a powerful new path to sustainability. If people really are happier working together for a worthy purpose, this exposes a multitude of win-win solutions to material problems, thereby building community while meeting material needs.

Introduction

This Community Essay surveys evidence showing that malleable social norms and the well-being benefits of pro-social acts together provide a powerful new path to sustainability. If people really are happier working together for a shared purpose, this exposes a multitude of win-win solutions to material problems that build community while meeting material needs. Akerlof & Kranton (2010) have emphasized the importance of social norms—how we ought to behave—and the ways they are based in notions of social identity—who we think we are. Dolan et al. (2011) have further discussed the implications of social norms for environmental sustainability.

Earlier approaches to sustainability by social scientists and policy makers typically rely on a variety of taxes and regulations aimed at influencing behavior, assuming that people make decisions based purely on economic criteria. Such measures are likely to fall far short of what is needed to achieve the required reductions in emissions, even if regulatory regimes could adequately embody the damage that emissions cause to the environment. The derived policies become somewhat more effective when augmented by the tools of behavioral economics, used to “nudge” people toward more desirable outcomes (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Dolan et al. 2011). However, neither the traditional nor nudge versions embody happiness as the main desired outcome, and neither yet takes full account of what has been learned from well-being research.

Ecological economics, which was founded on the perceived need to measure and preserve natural capital of all sorts, edged closer to a linkage with subjective well-being when hypothesizing a “broader Homo economicus...[who is] fully informed about how the economy is related to the ecosystem and is constituted in his very identity by the relations of community with both future generations and other species with whom he shares a place in the sun” (Costanza & Daly, 1992). Costanza & Daly (1992) hypothesize that, while individual decisions might be based on traditional economic self-interest, system-level decisions could and should be driven by the viewpoint of the broader Homo economicus. They argue that “[t]herefore valuation of natural capital...should be done by individuals acting in an entirely different mode from that in which they operate in consumer markets” (Costanza & Daly, 1992). This second mode of thinking, or “community sovereignty” (Costanza, 2000), has been used to support particular policy proposals that attach high values to sustainable practices, to value environmental externalities in benefit-cost analysis, and to advance a variety of resource-saving regulations and taxes.

Thus, most earlier analyses of ways to achieve environmental sustainability have used traditional views of individual incentives, or an expanded view making use of behavioral psychology, or alternatively relied on the hoped-for existence of a set of broader preferences that might be harnessed to support system-level decisions to help preserve the quality of natural capital in a world still rapidly increasing its use of those resources. Much of this prior work was in place before climate change came to be understood...
as an important environmental risk to a sustainable future. Since the problem of increasing carbon emissions involves global spillovers from individual and national actions, it represents in extreme form the difficulties of finding and implementing common actions to deliver sustainability.

**Recent Initiatives to Connect Happiness and Sustainability**

On July 19, 2011, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, in a resolution introduced by the Prime Minister of Bhutan and adopted without a vote, invited countries “to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being in development with a view to guiding their public policies.” The resolution notes that gross domestic product (GDP) “was not designed to and does not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of people in a country,” and “unsustainable patterns of production and consumption can impede sustainable development.”

Pursuant to this resolution, Bhutan organized a UN High Level Meeting in New York on April 2, 2012 specifically designed to combine happiness and sustainability. The preparations for this event included the first *World Happiness Report* and a variety of proposals aimed to build environmental sustainability and sustainable well-being, preferably in concert (Helliwell et al. 2012). In his concluding statement, included as part of the full report of the meeting, Prime Minister Thinley accepted the recommendation to lead the way toward the promotion and adoption of a new sustainability-friendly economic paradigm with well-being and happiness as its goals (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012).

The first *World Happiness Report* contains an inventory of the various measures of happiness available for a large number of countries, surveys the literature demonstrating their validity and reliability, and summarizes the related research on the determinants of subjective well-being. In terms of explaining cross-country differences in average happiness (as measured by individual assessments of the quality of people’s lives), the report finds that five main factors explain more than 80% of the cross-country differences. Two of these—the log of average per capita GDP and average years of healthy life expectancy—are also in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index. The other three—having someone to count on in times of trouble, having a sense of sufficient freedom to make key life decisions, and freedom from corruption in business and government—are together more important than is average income in explaining differences in happiness. Other research also shows a significant positive well-being contribution from generosity (as measured by the frequency of donations, adjusted for the donor’s income level) (Helliwell et al. 2010), as would be expected from the pro-social research findings discussed below. Since these five factors are inherently less demanding of material and environmental resources than is the production of GDP, a shift of developmental emphasis from GDP to happiness would immediately reduce potential conflicts between development and the environment.

Even a cursory inspection of the international spread of incomes and happiness shows how big a challenge it will be to close the income and well-being gaps in conventional ways without substantially increasing current environmental pressures. Of the approximately 150 countries included in the Gallup World Poll, the four least happy countries (from the bottom, Togo, Benin, the Central African Republic, and Sierra Leone, each with national averages below 3.6 on the 0 to 10 scale for the Cantril ladder, where 0 represents the worst possible life and 10 the best), have average incomes (measured at purchasing power parities, which reflect that most basic goods are cheaper in poorer countries) ranging from US$700 to US$1,400 per year. By contrast, the four countries with the highest measures of subjective well-being (from the top, Denmark, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands, each with ladder averages greater than 7.5) have average GDP per capita ranging from US$34,000 to US$51,000. In all of the other key supports for happiness, the top four countries are much better placed than the bottom four, although the extent of these disparities is generally smaller than for income.

These statistics first point to the need for reducing the relative importance of material supports for happiness, since incomes, when compared to the other supports for happier lives, are more unequally distributed and harder to increase without creating additional environmental pressures. Second, there is an obvious need to reduce the extent to which higher incomes depend on greater net use of natural capital. This is where the arsenal of economic and regulatory tools is brought into policy discussions. However, these measures are difficult to design, hard to impose, and under most forecasts are unlikely to have sufficiently large and rapid impacts to turn the tide.

Can well-being research provide new insights to help solve these problems? Two existing strands of research might help to resolve the two issues posed above. The first is whether and how a well-managed environment can help to increase happiness. The second examines the potential power of human altruism,
social norms, and social identities to provide new ways of approaching sustainability.

**Happiness and Natural Capital**

Natural capital and happiness are connected through a variety of direct and indirect routes. On a very primary level, people assigned to walk from A to B on a tree-lined path alongside the Rideau River in Ottawa were systematically happier than those taking the same trip via Carleton University’s underground tunnel system, and the actual gains were much higher than participants thought they would be (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011). Students who can see greenery out of their classroom windows do better than those who cannot (Matsuoka, 2010). A hospital window with a green view sees patients cured faster (Ulrich, 1984), and many other studies link green spaces to better health, performance, and life satisfaction (as surveyed by Basu et al. 2014).

These direct effects can lead to important indirect effects flowing through social connections. For example, people who live in more walkable neighborhoods in Galway, Ireland, were found to be significantly more likely than those in car-dependent suburbs to know their neighbors, to trust others, and to feel part of their community (Leyden, 2003). Each of these consequences has been shown to provide significant support for subjective well-being, enough to replace the benefits of a much larger income. For example, having a sense of belonging in one’s community has a larger effect on life satisfaction than a tripling of household income. Trusting that your wallet would be returned if found by a neighbor, for someone who already felt they belonged in their neighborhood, has the additional life-satisfaction equivalent of a one-third higher income (Helliwell & Barrington-Leigh, 2011). In addition, people living in walkable neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to feel they could walk to work (Leyden, 2003). This latter example contrasts different patterns of built rather than natural capital, but nonetheless shows how good design can create a win-win situation for the environment and happiness; better design cuts environmental pressures while simultaneously increasing the social connections that support happiness. The fact that less material-intensive types of planning also deliver happier neighborhoods in turn makes these improved designs socially and politically sustainable.\(^2\)

This observation relates to what I call the SHEEP principle, that for any approach to sustaina-

\(^2\) There is also some cross-country evidence of significantly positive combined direct and indirect linkages between natural capital and life satisfaction (Engelbrecht, 2009).

---

2003). This latter example contrasts different patterns of built rather than natural capital, but nonetheless likely to feel they could walk to work (Leyden, 2003). Each of these consequences has been shown to provide significant support for subjective well-being, enough to replace the benefits of a much larger income. For example, having a sense of belonging in one’s community has a larger effect on life satisfaction than a tripling of household income. Trusting that your wallet would be returned if found by a neighbor, for someone who already felt they belonged in their neighborhood, has the additional life-satisfaction equivalent of a one-third higher income (Helliwell & Barrington-Leigh, 2011). In addition, people living in walkable neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to feel they could walk to work (Leyden, 2003). This latter example contrasts different patterns of built rather than natural capital, but nonetheless shows how good design can create a win-win situation for the environment and happiness; better design cuts environmental pressures while simultaneously increasing the social connections that support happiness. The fact that less material-intensive types of planning also deliver happier neighborhoods in turn makes these improved designs socially and politically sustainable.\(^2\)

This observation relates to what I call the SHEEP principle, that for any approach to sustaina-

---

2003). This latter example contrasts different patterns of built rather than natural capital, but nonetheless likely to feel they could walk to work (Leyden, 2003). Each of these consequences has been shown to provide significant support for subjective well-being, enough to replace the benefits of a much larger income. For example, having a sense of belonging in one’s community has a larger effect on life satisfaction than a tripling of household income. Trusting that your wallet would be returned if found by a neighbor, for someone who already felt they belonged in their neighborhood, has the additional life-satisfaction equivalent of a one-third higher income (Helliwell & Barrington-Leigh, 2011). In addition, people living in walkable neighborhoods were more than twice as likely to feel they could walk to work (Leyden, 2003). This latter example contrasts different patterns of built rather than natural capital, but nonetheless shows how good design can create a win-win situation for the environment and happiness; better design cuts environmental pressures while simultaneously increasing the social connections that support happiness. The fact that less material-intensive types of planning also deliver happier neighborhoods in turn makes these improved designs socially and politically sustainable.\(^2\)

This observation relates to what I call the SHEEP principle, that for any approach to sustaina-
of the anti-apartheid struggle were imprisoned for many years. A dissection of the different versions of Milgram’s own experiments has been used to illustrate that whether obedience or resistance occurs depends on the degree to which the subjects identify with the experimenter administering the shocks (which makes them willing to press the button) or with the persons receiving the shocks (when they refuse to continue the experiment). The importance of free will in these choices was illustrated by the finding that if the students were ordered rather than asked to administer the shocks they were much more likely to refuse (Reicher et al. 2012).

How does this line of research relate to environmental sustainability? The data supporting this new view show that people are prepared to change their behavior dramatically for purposes that they and the rest of their norm-sharing social group believe to be legitimate and important. Thus people, especially in groups with shared social identities, can make profound changes. In the studies reviewed above, the choices are between obedience and resistance, since the setup is one where people are making choices to side with one of two oppositional groups (i.e., prisoners or guards). To apply this line of thinking to climate change requires a change of focus from oppositional to shared social identities. If people were to adopt, in addition to their more local loyalties, a shared encompassing identity as citizens of the world and guardians of its future [assumed as a wishful counterfactual by Costanza & Daly (1992)], then they would in principle have the same capacity to make major changes in behavior evident in the prison experiments and their real-world counterparts. Indeed, other prison experiments suggest such a third way that avoids oppositional identities entirely (Lovibond et al. 1979). If prisoners and guards have mutual engagement and shared purpose (encouraged by leadership that promotes respect), they acquire a shared identity, and conflict can be replaced by constructive actions.3

This possibility was demonstrated in the real world by the 1998 Singapore Prison Reforms (Leong, 2010), which extended the encompassing identity to include prisoners, prison staff, and the public at large, jointly committed to improve lives for all parties. The consequences have been significantly positive for well-being, as well as for conventional measures of success, with recidivism down by one-third, staff morale up, and former prisoners returning not as inmates but as volunteers to help current prisoners (Helliwell, 2011). If prisons, often seen as posing intractable problems, can be reformed so quickly, facilitated by big changes in the beliefs and behavior of all parties, why should not the potential for improvements in sustainability be even greater?

I have made the case for the importance and malleability of social norms by reference to several strands of research in social psychology and especially by drawing on prison studies. Appiah (2010) makes essentially the same points in a broader context, by presenting many cases, including slavery and footbinding, where revisions in accepted views of honorable actions—what it means to do the right thing—achieved big changes.

Humans are Pro-social Beings

We have already seen that humans are happier when they interact with others in a trusting environment, and hence that they are fundamentally social animals. The “social brain” hypothesis argues that this is not an evolutionary accident, but integral to the human ability to survive and prosper in a world shared with other, physically more powerful species (Dunbar, 1998). Human capacities for, and enjoyment in, large social groups well beyond family size gave them the capacity to develop and use collective action to meet external challenges. A stronger form of the hypothesis argues that humans are more than just social, they are pro-social. In other words, they get happiness not just from doing things with others, but from doing things both with and for others (e.g., Batson & Shaw, 1991). Even starting in infancy, children choose altruistic acts irrespective of rewards (Warme & Tomasel, 2009), are happier when they give rather than receive (Akkin et al. 2012), and prefer those who help rather than hinder others (Hamil & Wynn, 2011). Despite a wealth of findings that people who do things for others gain a bigger happiness boost than do the recipients of generosity (Schwartz & Sendor, 1999; Brown et al. 2003), people still tend to underestimate the happiness gains from unselfish acts (Dunn et al. 2008). Perhaps this is a buffer against the likelihood that the warm glow from kind acts would be less if the giver felt that he or she were doing them for selfish reasons. In addition, new evidence from brain scans shows that people get primary value from making decisions that they perceive as equitable, even at personal cost (Zaki & Mitchell, 2011). Hence doing the right thing endows subjective value. The social identity research described above suggests that these gains are likely to be even greater where people

3 An influential line of research on the “bystander effect” showed that people were more likely to offer help if they were alone rather than in a group (Latane & Darley, 1970). More recent research has shown that what makes the most difference is the group’s social identity structure and whether encompassing identities exist that include potential helpers and victims (Levine, 2012). To effectively create individual action on climate change, the relevant shared identities must include present and future generations.
identify with the beneficiaries of the equitable behavior. In the current case of environmental actions, the primary beneficiaries are those yet unborn.

The evidence thus shows a virtuous circle linking social connections, pro-sociability, and happiness. Since there are well-established links between sociability and the personality trait of extroversion, between extroversion and happiness, and between social activities and positive emotions, it is natural to ask if introverts are thereby partially or fully shut out from these beneficial feedbacks between social connections and happiness. The experimental answer seems to be that even introverts, and especially introverts, gain in positive emotions from reaching out to make social contacts (Zelenski et al. 2012).

How Can Pro-Social Inclinations Be Harnessed to Improve the Environment?

Although researchers who want to study people as they are, rather than as they are assumed to be, draw on both behavioral economics and subjective well-being, there has not yet been enough linkage between these two bodies of research. Whether applied to savings decisions or turning off the lights, most behavioral economics that engages in the analysis of nudge still operates without direct consideration of the subjective well-being (or the social identities) of the persons whose behavior is being nudged. The field of inquiry has not yet recast what is assumed about the basic goals of those whose behavior is subject to experiments. People are either assumed to have traditional economic objectives or to be interested in specific sub-objectives, such as saving for retirement, which might or might not be consistent, in either method or consequences, with improving happiness. One key insight from behavioral research is that corrective actions happen only if the problem or risk is seen as salient. The widespread scientific and media focus on the human sources of climate change is probably helpful in this respect, since people are more likely to respond if they see themselves as the source of the problem (Gilbert, 2011).

What can be added from subjective well-being research? While it has sometimes considered how the environment affects happiness, as discussed above, it has seldom gone further to try to find ways of harnessing social and pro-social inclinations (and the happiness they can deliver) to foster SHEEP sustainability. What might be some easy first steps?

Since the desire to improve environmental sustainability is now widespread, there is great potential for trying out, either on a formally experimental basis or by case studies, a variety of ways for improving the environment. Neighborhood gardens deserve to be closely watched, as they usually involve extensive collaboration, lots of chatting over the crops, and many innovative ways of shortening the human and geographic distance from the garden to the dinner table. Removing from these micro-cooperative ventures a range of rules and inspections designed to safeguard workers, transporters, distributors, and consumers involved at a distance in large-scale commercial agriculture also requires much rule bending and an easy regulatory hand. Where producers and consumers are more closely linked in the same neighborhoods, trust replaces formal regulations in ways that improve happiness and save resources simultaneously. If and where these local gardens flourish, they grow communities along with food (Ladner, 2011; Basu et al. 2013).

What other ventures might serve to build healthy communities while saving energy and resources? It is easy to imagine similar ways of increasing the collaboration and efficiency of recycling efforts by doing more at the neighborhood level. In addition, how about cooperative efforts to turn back the clock on the highly pervasive shift that has made driving children to school a social norm in many rich countries? Unfortunately, this replacement of human legs by motorcars increases energy use, reduces air quality, and erodes the health of parents and children alike. Each of the possible underlying reasons for this unfortunate trend can be addressed by harnessing the neighborhood’s collective capacity to develop life-enhancing social identities.

To the extent that parents or children are fearful of dangers on the journey to and from school, why not create kid-pools or walking clubs to get things started? There would initially be a responsible adult or older child in charge, and the safety objectives would be achieved. Gradually, the social and health benefits of walking would likely increase trust levels so as to soften the earlier fears, which in any event never had a strong basis in evidence.

For reasons not yet fully understood, there has been a downward trend in perceptions of neighborhood trust and safety without any corresponding increase in the frequency or severity of harmful events. When asked about the extent to which they have been victims of crime or attempted crime, respondents in most countries report actual victimization in the previous year to have been much lower than they expect it to be next year (Helliwell & Wang, 2011). People apparently think that their own favorable experiences over the past year were lucky breaks relative to what others have experienced. This observation may well explain the fact that when life satisfaction questions

---

4 For survey-based evidence that subjective well-being is linked positively and strongly with both the size and intensity of use of networks of friends and family, see Helliwell & Putnam (2004).
were asked within the context of the recent criminal victimization round of the Canadian General Social Survey, the average answers were significantly higher than when the same questions were asked in more general surveys (Bonikowska et al. 2013). The answers in the victimization survey would have been higher still if the respondents were not just happy about avoiding victimization but also believed that their favorable experience would continue. International comparisons of subjective well-being show that the perceived likelihood of future victimization is a more important determinant of well-being than is actual recent past experience (Helliwell & Wang, 2011).

People are also less trusting of others’ benevolence than they should be. To find a lost wallet, and to take the time and trouble to return it to the owner, is a benevolent act of a fairly high order. As reported above, people are far happier to live in a city or neighborhood where their lost wallet would be returned. Unfortunately, as in the case of crime, people are too pessimistic about the kindness of others and are needlessly unhappy as a result. The Canadian General Social Survey found that Torontonians think that the likelihood of their wallet being returned intact if found by a stranger is less than 25%. Yet when twenty wallets were experimentally dropped in urban locations in Toronto, sixteen were returned (Helliwell & Wang, 2011).

Thus we have strong evidence that neighborhoods are safer and more benevolent places than people believe. Unjustified lack of trust reduces happiness and encourages the drive to school for no valid reason. The walking-to-school project could and should help to build neighborhood trust and happiness at the same time as saving the environment (in modest measure, but a worthy start) while delivering healthier and happier children to and from school. In the course of these walks, further contacts are made, and children acquire a whole new set of friendly faces. Experience is thus likely to decrease perceived risks among both children and parents, and in turn increase confidence, giving children the freedom and assurance to chart their own routes, forge friendships, and enjoy unstructured play together. All of these are established supports for happy lives. And children who play together have more self-control, focus their activities, permitting people to have it all—to enjoy doing important things together in the interests of a more sustainable future. Doing the right thing can be enjoyable, and, if so, is more likely to be continued.

At the theoretical level, it remains necessary to develop and test the still-nascent idea that encompassing (or inclusive) social identities are both powerful and malleable. The same potent research tools that have been used to explain pervasive obedience or widespread resistance need to be focused on what it takes to create encompassing social identities that could change behavior so as to improve happiness and the environment simultaneously.

References

Basu, A., Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. 2014. Reasonableness as a way to move towards sustainable well-being. In T. Hämmäläinen &


