

“Hedonics, or the study of happiness: a load of old rubbish or a new hard science?”

Professor Peter J Stoward

Professor Stoward provided the members of the Cirencester Science Society's Christmas meeting on 11th December with a most entertaining and thought provoking lecture on the subject of happiness.

He explained that over the past decade or so an increasing number of economists and social scientists have attempted to measure the happiness or well being of individuals and countries, and to isolate the factors that may contribute to well being. One of the drivers in this quest has been the desire of governments to discover whether their policies and research programmes are actually resulting in improvements in the perceived well being of the electorate. Indeed, many applicants for scientific research grants now have to include an indication of ways in which their programme may result in an improvement in human well-being.

Professor Stoward briefly listed the various ways by which researchers have tried to measure subjective well-being through the use of: a) surveys of self-reported happiness, b) observed social behaviour, c) non-verbal behaviour and d) happiness correlations through “hard” science measures involving neurobiological, biochemical and anatomical measurements.

In this latter category some studies have discovered a close correlation between happiness and increased plasma dehydroepiandrosterone levels and smaller waist circumference measures in men but not in women. In contrast, lower plasma concentrations of inflammatory markers and increases in levels of high density cholesterol correlate significantly in women but not in men.

Professor Stoward listed some of the many indicators used to measure happiness including the Human Development Index (HDI) used by the United Nations, The UK Government's National Indicators of Sustainable Development (NISD) and The Economist Intelligence Unit's Quality of Life Index (QLI). Interestingly this latter measure indicated that the UK's lower QLI than many other European countries appears to have been due to poorer measures of family life and political instability despite higher scores for gender equality.

The conclusion seems to be that much of the considerable data on happiness published so far is of limited value but the objective of developing new technologies and policies for measuring and improving the well-being of individuals and nations is clearly well worth pursuing.

Given on Wednesday 11th December 2013 at the Royal Agricultural University

Professor Stoward's paper on this subject is on the Society's website under 'Papers'