

Victorians were 'happier' than we are now, finds CAGE research

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Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

New research by the University of Warwick's Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy (CAGE) and the Social Market Foundation shows that levels of happiness appear to have been highest during the Victorian era, and during the 20th Century peaked during 1957, a level to which they have never returned.

Researchers at CAGE at the University of Warwick, a research centre in the Department of Economics, chose to begin in 1776, the date of the American Declaration of Independence, one of the most famous of all historical documents to specifically reference happiness, up to 2009. This comparison found that the massive collapse of well-being during the two world wars eclipses anything else except the Great Depression.

Computational linguistics, a line of research that uses computer-science techniques to analyse language and speech, turns words into a newly potent research tool – and with billions of words to choose from online, have given researchers a wealth of avenues to explore when researching our ancestors' levels of well-being and satisfaction with their lives. The word content used for this analysis came from books digitised by Google. Researchers looked at eight million books to track changing patterns in happiness across the UK, Italy, the USA, France, Spain and Germany.

Although in 1957 life expectancies were lower, GDP was lower, more hours were worked in a typical week and very few households had central heating and less than half owned a television, levels of public happiness were at a height never reached again in the British post-War period.

The CAGE report explores the relationship between happiness and public policy. Traditionally, the growth of Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, has been the chief measurement of success of government policy in the West. However, more recently attention has turned to "subjective well-being" or, in layman's terms, "happiness"—should policymakers turn their attention to increasing happiness in the same way that they seek to increase GDP?

The report repeatedly identifies that although growth of GDP is commonly treated as the highest aim of [public policy](#), happiness does not

appear to rise in accordance with GDP, which researchers theorised may be due to something missing from our historical understanding of the relationship between happiness and growth.

To try and find what has been missed, researchers decided to examine the same country over a significant period of time, much longer than can be conventionally studied using existing government surveys about happiness. Therefore, in order to compare and contrast levels of GDP and levels of happiness, researchers turned to Google Books.

More than eight million books have been digitised by Google Books, which gave researchers hundreds of billions of words to sift through when looking for patterns. The term valence is used to signify the emotion contained in a word. Words with high ratings indicate that they are associated with positive emotions; words with low ratings with negative ones. High valence words include "enjoyment", "vacation", and "peaceful", low valence words include "murder", "disease" and "starvation".

Researchers found no connection between economic growth and the state of human happiness in the long run, but that economic instability and downturns such as recessions and economic collapse of the magnitude of the Great Depression do lead to plummeting levels of well-being.

The report concludes that happiness is a relative concept: it depends on things like expectations and aspirations, and these will certainly have changed since Victorian times. If we have much higher aspirations now than a century ago, then the report suggests that this could be one reason why there seems to be a good deal of unhappiness around today.

Daniel Sgroi, one of the report's authors and Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, commented:

"A greater focus on happiness in policy-making could also shape policy-making procedures right from their conception.

"If this approach were taken to its logical conclusion, the next public spending round in a nation like the UK would consist of the different government departments presenting their sets of policies with estimated costs and [happiness](#) benefits."

Provided by University of Warwick

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