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So are we getting happier?

by

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Biarritz was brill. Bordeaux was beautiful. St Tropez was simply terrific. But I'm back, as Mr Schwarzeneger would say, and for once the barrel of August returns my stare, as though wagging a finger, to say: I told you the sane and interesting people would be gone.

Yet early holidays have one advantage. They allow time to reflect on life and happiness.

You do not have to be a social scientist to wonder if all goes well with society. Researchers have begun studying this systematically. The findings are disturbing. We are besieged by possessions, of course, but that -- sensible economists take note -- is not the same thing as contentment.

How can we decide whether society's wellbeing is increasing? First, we can add up material stuff, which is the Gross Domestic Product method. The news then is excellent, if you are a born bean-counter. Second, we can study annual happiness and mental-health surveys. The news is then not great. Third, we can draw on the Human Development Index, favoured by United Nations statisticians. Its prognosis is encouraging. Fourth, we can look at the suicide rate. The news is then mixed.

Let us dispose of Gross Domestic Product per head. It has gone up. Big-time. A country like Britain or France is about three times as rich as after World War 2. I suspect that hot showers have created an unambiguous gain in human wellbeing. But, leaving aside the familiar mind-set of party-political broadcasts, when it comes to hot cars and hot pants, it is not so clear.

A better place to start is by asking people how they feel. Economists have traditionally been against this. But if DNA helixes could talk, would biologists refuse to listen to their spirally whispers?

Happiness surveys began in a reliable and consistent way in the 1970s. They have been done every year since, all over the advanced world. Thousands of randomly selected individuals are asked to rate their happiness, and life satisfaction, on a scale. We also use measures of people's mental health, assess how well they are sleeping, and follow folk longitudinally – or in other words I come back to you year after year to see how you are feeling after the thunder and lightning of the year's life events. Slowly it is possible to build up marvellous statistical pictures of human lives, with all their ups and downs. An interesting strand of research has sprung up that nestles at the touching point of economics, sociology, psychology and epidemiology.

We find something interesting from happiness surveys. People do not feel cheerier with their lives than their parents did at the same age.

In fact in the United States, which is one of my favourite countries, recorded happiness levels have fallen in the last three decades (details are on my website www.oswald.co.uk). White American women have been secularly the biggest losers. We do not understand why. A natural conjecture, though, is that the lives of females, especially highly educated ones, have become unusually complicated.

If you prefer a cross between GDP and happiness surveys, you could plump instead for the Human Development Index (HDI). It is popular with bureaucrats in quasi-governmental organizations who live in expensive cities like Brussels and New York. HDI is a composite. It averages three perfectly sensible things: longevity, years of education of the typical citizen, and standard of living as captured by GDP. Norway comes top of the Human Development Index league table (this is 2002, so everything is a competition and has to have a league table, even human wellbeing). Australia and Canada also do well; the United States comes around the middle of the top 10; the United Kingdom puffs in at a could-be-a-lot-worse number 14 in the world.

Yet I do not find HDI at all persuasive. It is fine for sorting out a savagely poor nation from one with plenty of MacDonalds restaurants. We should

certainly worry more about Sierra Leone than ourselves. But HDI does not address the subtle issues that matter within the prosperous nations.

Finally, if we have the mental courage, we can look at data on those who kill themselves. Wilfred Sheen remarked that suicide is about life, being in fact the sincerest criticism that life gets. Here the news is fairly encouraging. Over the last century, as best we can measure the numbers consistently, the rate of suicide has fallen by more than a third in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, in many advanced countries, young men have recently started killing themselves more often. We think this may be because of the decline of marriage and the rise of drug abuse. No-one knows for sure.

So -- the big question -- has a country like ours become happier through the last few decades? My judgment, as a happiness researcher, is no. The curse of human-ness is that people feel compelled unconsciously to look over their shoulders all the time: happiness and self-esteem depend on rank and relative income. There is only so much rank to go around. Still.