

MACS325, 2010: Happiness consultancy suggestions

Purpose

The central purposes of the Happiness Consultancy are for you to demonstrate your understanding of research on happiness and connect it with observations and other data you gather yourself. You will achieve this by exploring the conditions of happiness for a particular group of people and making recommendations to the group about how they might increase their level of happiness.

Procedure

We recommend that you form a student team of two to four members. You then need to consider the kind of group of people you want to make contact with. You need to be practical as well as follow the correct ethical protocols (see subject outline). That is, you need to pick a group of people who interest you and you need to be able to make contact with them. (Do you know anyone in the group? Do they have public contact point?) The group may be a business, a sports group, a community group, an educational establishment (but not the university) and so on.

You then need to make contact with members of your chosen group and negotiate the conditions of your study. Identify an appropriate person (e.g. manager or group leader) to contact by email or phone. You should explain to them the nature of the project and what it is you want to do.

Your team should try to identify aspects of the group's activities that contribute to their happiness and ones that reduce happiness. You can do this through a combination of observation (make notes of your observations on the day) and interviews with key people. We will explore the interview process in class. You should try to transcribe (write out) at least the key parts of interviews. You will need to draw from your knowledge of the literature on happiness. Having made observations and conducted interviews you should meet with your team and discuss the issues that have arisen. Of course there may be many factors contributing to happiness and/or areas of potential improvement. We suggest that you concentrate on one or two issues in order to make the project manageable and give a reasonable level of depth to your work.

As a team you should write up a report (this may be in a variety of forms; see subject outline) for the group members and show it to them. You should revise your report in the light of feedback you receive.

As individuals you then need to write your reflections on the project's process, methods and findings. You might like to ask questions like: How well did your team work together? How could you have worked better? Could you have been happier? How easy was it to identify the causes and conditions of happiness? How well did you interact with the target group? Could you have done better? What have you learned about happiness? If you did the project again, how would you do it differently?

Example 1 A team of three students made contact with a local surf club. They arranged to interview 8 members of the club. They also spent a day at the club observing activities. From their interviews they noted high levels of overall self-reported happiness. This was a result of (a) social interaction, (b) a sense of purpose, and (c) physical activity, all documented contributing factors to happiness. However, they also noted that the volunteers reported lower levels of satisfaction than the paid life guards. Interviews revealed that this was because the volunteers were rostered into less desirable slots without consultation. The student group wrote a report that recommended (1) holding regular consultation meetings, (2) instituting a fairer rostering system and (3) volunteers to maintain a gratitude diary recording all the good things about what they did. After giving their report to club members, the student team recorded comments about their recommendations.

Example 2 A team of two students visited a book club. They observed that a couple of book club members monopolised choices of books and ran the meetings like a seminar, with little opportunity for socialising, causing dissatisfaction among some other members. The students also interviewed several club members individually. Drawing on research into friendship and communication, the team recommended some processes for helping every club member join the conversation and have a say in book choices. The team produced a package — comprising a book bag, bookmark and leaflet, each printed with information about communication skills — and gave one package to each book club member. Club members agreed to try the recommendations. The students visited the next meeting of the club and observed an improved atmosphere.

Timetable

Start organising your project early. This is an activity that requires planning and plenty of time to let things unfold in order to deal with any practical problems that occur. We suggest the following timetable.

Week 4: student teams are formed during class

Week 5: Choose possible target groups

Mid semester recess: use this time to make contact with potential group.

Week 6 and 7: Contact groups. Devise questions. Arrange interviews.

Weeks 8 and 9: Carry out observations and interviews. Begin reflections.

Week 10: Meet to discuss issues. Add to reflections.

Week 11: Prepare a draft of the report and present it to target group. Add to reflections.

Week 12: Revise report and reflections.

Week 13: Finalise report and reflections and hand them in.