

## **Sara Ahmed's approach to happiness and how it relates to positive psychology**

**Summary** Sara Ahmed's concept of happiness does not mesh very well with happiness as understood in scientific research on happiness, whether happiness is understood as current feeling or as life satisfaction.

### **Prelude**

Sara Ahmed in *The promise of happiness* addresses the imperative to be happy, subjecting it to a sophisticated cultural critique. She provides an erudite tour of ideas about happiness, affect, objects and promises.

Here I comment on the relation between Ahmed's approach to happiness and research on happiness carried out by psychologists, economists and others, which is sometimes generically referred to as positive psychology. My basic point is that there is a mismatch between these two approaches, a mismatch that Ahmed seems not to appreciate. This is not to detract from her endeavour but to distinguish positive psychology from her characterisations, which are often misleading.

### **“Introduction: why happiness, why now?”**

In her introduction, Ahmed provides the context for her analysis. She has many comments and questions about happiness and research about it, all of which are useful for stimulating thinking about the issues. My focus here is on her characterisation of happiness research. She does not provide a systematic review of the field, but rather cites a few sources, and gives a few quotes from those sources, as the basis for her own critical commentary. In doing this, she misses the diversity of viewpoints in the field and misrepresents what researchers are doing.

Most of the research in positive psychology, as in other scientific fields, is highly technical and includes careful qualifications about findings. Ahmed mentions “the academic journal *Happiness Studies*” (p. 4) — its actual title is *Journal of Happiness Studies* — but does not cite any papers published in the journal. What she does draw on are popularisations of happiness research such as Richard Layard's *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* and Michael Argyle's *The Psychology of Happiness*. These are softer targets for critical analysis, especially when quotations

drawn from them are examined without reference to the wider body of research in the field.

She says “Unhappiness remains the unthought in much philosophical literature, as well as in happiness studies.” (p. 17) I can’t comment about philosophy, but it is unfair to criticise happiness studies for not focusing on unhappiness. After all, as Ahmed herself had written a few pages earlier (pp. 7–8), positive psychology is an attempt to redress psychology’s previously overwhelming focus on unhappiness, as manifested in depression, anxiety and other negative states.

Ahmed briefly discusses the concept of flow, giving a few quotes from Mihály Csikszentmihályi, who developed the concept (p. 11). Csikszentmihályi noticed a satisfying state of being when individuals, who had put effort into developing a skill such as playing soccer or flying a plane, exercise that skill at an optimal level, when the challenge is neither too high (which could cause anxiety) nor too low (which could lead to boredom). The quotes from Csikszentmihályi given by Ahmed accurately reflect this idea.

However, Ahmed’s own comments about flow go off in a different direction than Csikszentmihályi. Ahmed introduces the topic by saying “The idea of ‘flow’ to describe the relationship between happy persons and happy worlds is powerful.” But Csikszentmihályi’s studies are about a particular state, not generally about “happy persons and happy worlds.” Ahmed, further on, gives her own take on flow, saying “When the subjects are not ‘in flow’ they encounter the world as resistant, as blocking rather than enabling an action. Unhappy subjects hence feel alienated from the world as they experience the world as alien.” This is not a message that I took from Csikszentmihályi’s writings. He does not claim there is any particular problem when not experiencing flow, because there are other contributors to emotion. My assessment is that Ahmed has used the concept of flow in a different way than Csikszentmihályi, and has not related it to the wider body of writing about happiness.

Research has found that several different patterns of thought and behaviour reliably improve people’s happiness, at least on average (i.e., more people’s happiness is increased than decreased). Many of these thoughts and behaviours Ahmed does not

address at all: physical activity, gratitude, forgiveness, mindfulness and savouring. Others she gives at best cursory treatment: flow, optimism<sup>1</sup> and relationships.

Ahmed thus does not engage with the body of scientific research on happiness, but rather mentions it — often misleadingly — to provide a springboard for her own analysis.

### **Chapter 1, “Happy objects”**

At the outset of the chapter (p. 21), Ahmed makes a series of assertions, including that “happiness also turns us toward objects” and that “Happiness involves affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good)” (p. 21) She provides no evidence or justification for these assertions, so they are best understood as indicating the way she wants to talk about happiness.

Throughout the chapter, Ahmed assumes a strong connection between happiness and objects.<sup>2</sup> Research on happiness does not have this emphasis, and indeed tends to argue that objects are fairly low in importance for fostering happiness. Physical activity reliably improves mood without necessarily being attached to an object. Mindfulness can bring a satisfying state, but in meditation (one road to mindfulness) the object focused on — for example, one’s breath or the word “om” — is a means for obtaining a particular mental state, and not normally something that “moves” a person. Helping other people can improve happiness, but it is the helping

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<sup>1</sup> In chapter 5, Ahmed addresses optimism. However, her treatment seems unconnected with psychological research on optimism. She does not cite Martin Seligman’s pioneering research in the area; Seligman is widely acknowledged as the founder of positive psychology.

She writes: “Positive psychology as a field is predicated on this promise: if you say, ‘I am happy’ or make other positive self-declarations (if you practice being optimistic until it is habitual or routine to look on the bright side), then you will become happy. In such a framework, you can talk yourself *into* being happy by talking about yourself *as* being happy.” (p. 200) This is a misreading or misrepresentation of positive psychology, which is not predicated on any such universal promise, is far broader than optimism, and does not recommend making positive self-declarations as a road to happiness.

<sup>2</sup> The one exception is her reference to “unattributed happiness”: “You feel happy, not quite knowing why” (p. 25).

that generates greater wellbeing, not the object or cause assisted. In summary, Ahmed's emphasis on objects is at variance with most research on happiness.

Ahmed says "Happiness involves affect (to be happy is to be affected by something)", but this is true only in a trivial sense. Some people are "naturally" happy. In the terms used in the research, they have a high happiness set point, due to genetics or upbringing. Everyone is affected by all sorts of things, but this does not explain a high set point. The experience of flow — as noted, this can occur when engrossed in an activity that requires skills, like sports or artistic creation, at a level high enough to be challenging but low enough not to cause anxiety — can be satisfying by being all-absorbing. It adds little to say that flow is being affected by something, because in this case the "something" is past efforts to develop skills and the current circumstances of exercising them.

Ahmed says "Happiness involves ... intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something)." In contrast, most happiness research says happiness is the outcome of ways of thinking and behaving, and therefore often is not about something specific. Physical activity improves mood, and this improvement is not often "about something." Avoiding social comparison increases happiness, and it is precisely *not* about something. Being with a friend can bring happiness, but this results from the experience. It is only secondarily, or in reflecting on it, about the existence of friendship itself.

Ahmed says "Happiness involves ... evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good)." However, if happiness is not "about something" then there is no judgement involved. Research shows that most people have mistaken ideas about what makes them happy, for example believing that winning the lottery or getting a higher-paying job will make them much happier, and not recognising the role of gratitude, forgiveness, flow, relationships and so forth in their happiness. When people's views about the reasons for their happiness are misguided, it makes little sense to say that happiness involves judgement. In this assertion by Ahmed, she assumes that happiness is about something, which, as discussed above, does not mesh with happiness research.

In summary, Ahmed has lots of fascinating things to say based on her masterful tour of thinkers and related concepts. She is welcome to define happiness how she likes. However, her definition seems unanchored in either research in the

field or in a rich data set. She makes universalising assumptions about happy objects without qualifying them as referring to particular cultures or life styles.

It seems that much of what Ahmed refers to as happiness would, in the terminology of happiness researchers, be called pleasure, namely a short-term sensory experience. This is part of the usual concept of happiness, but, as mentioned above, leaves out a host of other factors that contribute to a person's emotional state.

Concerning the promise of happiness, the title of her book, she writes, "The promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows" (p. 29). She subjects this concept of the promise of happiness to critique. What she doesn't do is relate it to happiness research, some of which directly addresses the promise. For example, research on physical activity and emotions could lead to this promise: "if you regularly undertake physical activity, you are more likely to feel better than if you don't." Similar statements could be made about expressing gratitude, being mindful and fostering positive personal relationships. What would Ahmed say about such findings? We don't know, because her concept of happiness is linked to objects and is different from the one addressed by happiness researchers.

In conclusion, there is much to learn from *The Promise of Happiness*, but it is not a reliable guide to research in the field. If you want a sophisticated treatment of emotions and objects, read *The Promise of Happiness*; if you want to know what makes people happy, study the findings of happiness research.

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### **Further reading**

Here are some accessible presentations of happiness research, most of them written by leading researchers in the field. My comments about *The Promise of Happiness* may be in part influenced by reading research published after 2010 when the book appeared, so the following sources are listed according to publication date. Ahmed cites some of these books but does not accurately represent the ideas in them.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990)

Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002)

Jonathan Haidt, *The happiness hypothesis: finding modern truth in ancient wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006)

Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007)

Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The how of happiness: a scientific approach to getting the life you want* (New York: Penguin, 2008)

Robert Biswas-Diener (ed.), *Positive Psychology as Social Change* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011)

Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't; What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does* (New York: Penguin, 2013)

Paul Dolan, *Happiness by Design: Change What You Do, Not How You Think* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2014)