Identity, Migration and Happiness

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Abstract: *In this essay I offer reflections on how research on identity might connect to emerging research on happiness and well-being. I start with the premise that academic researchers, to the extent that we are interested in the "impact" of our research, would find it difficult to avoid a concern with happiness or well-being – insofar as we would want the "impact" of our work to be positive rather than negative. This premise poses difficult challenges for research on identity: while one can easily find positive correlations between strength of national identity and happiness, it is by no means clear that increases in strength of national identity would lead to increased happiness. A particular concern arises in relation to immigrants: efforts to enhance national identity among immigrants might carry negative consequences for their well-being, particularly if such efforts are conducted by governments in a quasi-coercive mode.*

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I start by working towards a premise that might not sit terribly well with many people here – but my sense is that, on reflection, it becomes difficult to make a convincing case against it. The first part of that premise is that we want our work as academics, as researchers, to have an impact of some sort, in the sense that it makes a difference beyond universities, not just with other academics. In the UK, academic research is now going to be evaluated explicitly in these terms, and the fact that this is a government initiative that has funding consequences has led some people to think of "impact" as a dirty word. But I've come to believe that the core idea is appropriate, leaving aside the institutional implementation of it in Britain. We could consider that proposition in the reverse – would we want our work to have no impact at all, beyond being read and occasionally cited by other scholars? Some academics don't ask that question, but it seems to me that, once we ask it, it becomes hard to conclude that impact of some sort is really of no interest to us.

But that's not yet the main idea here. If impact is, then, a relevant notion, it quickly becomes clear that we want our work to have a positive impact, not a negative one. Perhaps we then have to conclude that we want it to do some sort of good in the world, not the opposite of good.

Well – we then have to know what we mean by good. As social scientists, particularly if we think in terms of Max Weber's discussion of the distinction between fact and value, we are often at pains to emphasize that we don't do our work in a normative mode: the science part of our work, which is prop-

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erly the dominant part, is empirical and neutral, we are not philosophers. And so many social scientists, at least, don't think systematically about normative issues – they're outside our competence, not part of our discipline.

Some people reject this distinction between fact and value as naïve and believe that it isn't possible to separate them; we can't avoid values, not even in our analyses, there are no neutral findings – and if we "try" to avoid them, then we end up aligned with a political position of some sort by default, unwittingly.

That view is akin to one of the arguments I want to make here – but I want to make it not about the direct political implications of our work, but more deeply about its normative implications. To the extent that we reject normative issues as beyond our competence or concern, we then work by default with a set of common-sense views on what counts as good or beneficial, something that we're barely aware of, most of the time. Actually, we probably don't work explicitly with any particular view at all – we merely offer a paragraph or two at the end of an empirical research article that suggests some "policy implications" of our findings. But this is usually woefully underdeveloped – it's typically very superficial, perhaps even an academic ritual or custom, not plausibly taken as anything serious, completely without impact in any practical sense.

And in that mode in particular, we see virtually no attempt to define or defend what we mean by *good*. Well, that seems unsatisfying. A policy implication is, by definition, something we believe is desirable. If it is desirable, then it must be good. So again, what do we mean by good?

We can start by considering the possibility that what we mean is that we want to see an improvement in people's well-being of some sort. This isn't quite as tautological as it might seem, given that there are other philosophical positions on what counts as *good*. But it would be a distraction to get into any extended discussion of virtue ethics or perfectionism. So, if we limit the discussion to what can be described as a weak "welfarist" position, where individual well-being is not the only thing that is important but it is nonetheless important, we can then discuss well-being as what we mean by "good".

But then we have to define what we mean by *well-being* – if we don't, then it is little more than a tautology. We therefore can make a basic distinction between *objective well-being* and *subjective well-being*. And it's the concept of *subjective well-being* that gets us to the main connection I want to make today, because subjective well-being is in essence a jargon term for *happiness*.

Happiness was (historically) important, in the history of social thought, among the utilitarians in particular (without going back even further, to the Greeks). But for many decades now, our public discourse has been dominated by an assumption that says it isn't possible to know anything meaningful about subjective well-being, nor is it necessary – because it is sufficient to know about objective well-being. And the reason this is sufficient is that if someone has high levels of objective well-being then it is assumed that they will also have high subjective well-being. Here we have the revealed preferences assumption of modern neo-classical economics, which says that we can know from people's choices and behaviours what makes them experience "utility" – the choices reveal the preferences, given the constraint of limited resources.

This assumption has two implications, about which we would surely want to consider some doubts: one is that satisfying one's preferences, actually leads to utility, and the other is that an increase in resources, and, in particular, an increase in income, leads to greater utility. And though I'm using this term *utility*, I could just as well use *happiness*, because it's nothing more than the subjective counterpart to the objective facts of income and the things income can get for us. So, again, objective well-being leads to subjective

well-being – and, in particular, a higher income leads to greater happiness.

You will no doubt be aware that it is precisely this claim that has come under attack in recent years by people engaged in the field now known as *happiness studies*. We have the Easterlin paradox, which tells us that although wealthier or higher-income people are on average happier than poorer people, gaining more income does not on average lead to greater happiness, particularly in countries that are already relatively wealthy. The point is most obvious in relation to economic growth. The reason people with higher incomes are happier than those with lower incomes is that they can compare themselves favourably to others, it's a matter of status. The difficulty is that economic growth doesn't change the comparison if everyone is moving up in concert, not changing positions. Individual changes in happiness are possible with individual economic mobility, some up and some down – but growth can't produce an aggregate increase in status, for the society as a whole.

So, increases in objective well-being do not reliably lead to increases in subjective well-being. Even individual mobility, an increase in relative position, is not an influential determinant of happiness: other factors are more important, and most people do not increase their income enough to achieve significant increases in happiness. We are pretty confident about this point in relation to income, and there are other types of objective well-being where the same point might well apply. We wouldn't necessarily want to generalize it – perhaps, for some types of objective well-being, an increase does lead to an increase in subjective well-being – but if nothing else it is necessary to treat the issue as an empirical question, rather than as an axiom.

We then get, after what you might consider an excessive delay, to *identity*. Why study identity? It's an interesting topic – but is interesting enough to let interest alone be the justification? Would we really be satisfied by a better understanding – or is a better understanding somehow meant to lead to an improvement in people's well-being, and even to an improvement in their happiness? My initial comments were intended to lay the ground for the suggestion that, as with any topic of academic interest, the study of identity ought to be interested in connecting to the possibility that the results of one's research might be useful, in the sense that they could somehow lead to an improvement in people's well-being – and I've tried to suggest, further, that *happiness* is an appropriate way of specifying what we mean by *well-being*. So: can research on identity somehow lead to an increase in happiness?

Well, that is going to work out to be a very complicated and difficult question. I want to start to address it by bringing a more empirical focus to the discussion. Using data from the 2005 round of the World Values Survey, and I analyzed data for 13 European countries (including Romania), I came up with a model explaining variation in individuals' happiness in which a number of identity variables emerge as significant predictors. (All of this involves a standard set of control variables, including age, income, unemployment, religiosity, etc.) One of these variables comes from a question that asks, "how proud are you to be Romanian", or to be French, the nationality of the country in question. Pride in one's national identity apparently contributes significantly to one's happiness, or is at least associated with it. Now, the happiness variable comes from a question that has only four response items, so the analysis has to use an ordinal logistic model. But if I use a life satisfaction variable with ten responses as the dependent variable, so that it's more plausible to use ordinary least squares regression, I get equivalent results – and with OLS I can then get standardized coefficients, and the standardized coefficients indicate that pride in national identity, in terms of its association with life satisfaction, is on par with unemployment and being married or having a partner. I find this quite surprising: a standard deviation increase in pride in national identity

increases happiness as much as a standard deviation increase in unemployment reduces it.

The question that, perhaps then arises is: does this sort of result mean that the value of research on identity consists, in part, in the notion that we should try to find ways to enhance people's identification with their nation – because if they have more national pride they will be happier or more satisfied with their lives? I'm sure many of you are immediately skeptical of that proposition, and I will offer my own reasons for doubt as well.

In the first instance, we would want to know more about how to explain the association I've identified. I spent a fair amount of time trying to find ways to "explain" it by adding variables to the model. I focused mainly on attitudes towards immigrants: my thought was that, perhaps, pride in national identity was a matter of hating or fearing foreigners. In other words, if national pride goes hand in hand with xenophobia, then it isn't clear that we would want to try to increase national pride, even if we were confident that doing so would lead to greater happiness for some. I focused in particular on three variables: whether someone said they didn't want to live next door to immigrants or foreign workers, whether they thought that citizens should have priority over immigrants for jobs, and whether they distrust foreigners. The consequence was that adding all three of these variables to the model produced no change at all in the coefficient for the national pride variable. People who distrust foreigners or don't want them as neighbours are less happy than others (controlling for other factors), but controlling for these additional variables doesn't reduce the association of *national pride* with *happiness*.

So, perhaps, we wouldn't have to worry about xenophobia as a by-product of increased national pride. Even so, there are a number of reasons to be sceptical of the idea that we would use an analysis like this as a basis for some sort of practical intervention designed to increase pride in one's national identity. One main reason is that these are cross-sectional results, a cross-sectional regression model. We, therefore, would have to wonder about the possibility of an Easterlin-style paradox in relation to identity. People with a stronger sense of national identity, at least as evident in saying on a survey that they have more pride in that identity, are happier than those with a weaker sense of national identity – but this does not have to mean that an increase in salience or strength of national identity would obviously lead to an increase in happiness. What we see for income, in those terms, might hold for identity as well. It's worth noting that social science is full of this kind of analysis, a lot of what we know (or think we know) is based on models like this, and they have some real limitations.

One of the things we would need to know is: who are the people who have a lower sense of pride in national identity, and why do they have a lower sense of pride in national identity? That issue would be important, in part, in relation to the other main objection we could raise about this idea that we might try to increase national pride as a way to increase people's happiness. Even if we could be confident about the longitudinal nature of this proposition, we would still have to contend with complexities of the practical angle. Who is going to go about trying to increase people's sense of national identity, and how?

It would be conventional to look to political parties and governments to adopt this sort of goal, and indeed many governments already do it, though not on the basis that it will increase people's happiness. So we then get to a set of issues that are likely to make us even more uncomfortable. Mainly, these would have to do with unintended consequences, or, perhaps, intended consequences that are different from the ostensible or declared intentions.

It is not hard at all to imagine some undesirable unintended consequences that might follow from government efforts to increase people's sense of national identity, particularly for groups where national identity might be weak. Again, if there is to be an initiative

to increase people's pride in national identity, you would want to focus on people for whom pride in national identity is currently low. Here I'm thinking particularly of immigrants – and another set of analyses I conducted for this presentation confirms what you would expect, that immigrants express significantly lower levels of pride in the nationality of the country they are residing in at the time of the survey. This point holds in a bivariate comparison and in a regression analysis with a number of control variables. I should add a caution that the World Values Survey in the last decade stopped asking the question that allows me to distinguish between immigrants and the native-born, so I have to use data from 1995 for this point, and that is not only a different point in time, it's a different context for quite a number of European countries, even a different set of people, in some cases. But it seems unlikely to me that this difference between natives and immigrants would have disappeared over the course of the 10 years that passed between the rounds of the survey in question.

Working further with the 1995 data: what emerges is that immigrants report lower levels of happiness than natives of the various European countries, again with a standard set of control variables – though without the pride in national identity variable. This is consistent with what others have found, including one of our hosts, Sergiu Bălțătescu, and myself in a different paper about the US. Well: adding that identity variable to the model renders the immigrant variable definitively non-significant. I find that to be a fairly compelling result. Immigrants are less happy than natives, they express less pride in the national identity in question, and, in comparing the two models, it becomes plausible to conclude that immigrants are less happy than natives in part because they are living in a situation where they find it difficult to have a feeling of belonging in the national context.

This is probably not a terribly ambitious assertion – in fact, perhaps, it seems merely like a confirmation of common sense. Well, where does it leave us, in relation to the question I have set as my main task for this presentation – that is, does it lead to some sort of practical implication, perhaps a suggestion concerning what governments might do if they were interested in trying to increase people's well-being or happiness. To sharpen that question: people with less pride in national identity report lower happiness, immigrants in particular report lower happiness and less pride in national identity – so, can governments do anything to increase national identification among immigrants as part of a path that might result in increased happiness for them?

If we look at what governments in various countries have actually been doing in relation to integration policy directed towards immigrants, I think we'd have to embrace a pretty pessimistic answer to that question. What I have in mind is situations where governments, in recent years, have moved away from active embrace of a multiculturalist orientation to immigrant integration, towards a more assimilationist approach, designed to shore up or recreate a more homogenous national identity and to increase the extent to which people – and particularly immigrants – actively identify with that identity. It would be very difficult in methodological terms to gauge the happiness consequences of a policy change of this sort – unless it were set up first as a sort of experiment that was specifically designed for evaluation, rather than applying to an entire national space – but I find it hard to imagine a plausible scenario in which a more actively assimilationist approach to immigrant integration would lead to increasing happiness for immigrants via an increase in their sense of national identification (and it isn't even clear to me that such a policy would actually increase their sense of national identity).

It seems more plausible to imagine that a policy change of this sort would have negative consequences, if any, in relation to happiness. Assimilationist integration policies in the UK, where we've had a shift of the sort I just

noted, strike me as leading immigrant communities there to feel a sense of pressure or even of being besieged, possibly alienating them more than leading to a feeling of being more British. We can contemplate the notion of *immigrants* acceding to pressures for assimilation, undergoing unwanted changes and experiencing a psychological or emotional cost in doing so. The notion that they are unwanted is implied in the fact that, apparently, the government has to do various things to put pressure on them in this direction.

Mechanisms for pressure of this sort, again thinking of the UK and also the Netherlands, have included the various citizenship tests, designed to require people to study about the values and culture of the destination country – apparently in the hope that if people learn about these values they will then be more likely to adopt them. I took the British version of this test as part of my own application for British citizenship last year – and while I am by no means typical of most immigrants in the UK I found the experience vaguely absurd and, at best, slightly annoying, and completely irrelevant to any feeling of Britishness on my part.

It's interesting for me, at least, to think in terms of my own direct experience in this way, but government initiatives like this are not targeted at immigrants like me, they're targeted mainly at Muslim immigrants, to put it bluntly. What I then think we have is less a genuine effort to foster "shared values" – by which we mean, immigrants being led to adopt the values of the majority – than an effort at impression management for the political advantage of the party in power – it creates the impression that the government is working hard to reinforce Britishness (as that is understood by the native white population). In this regard, it seems more likely to backfire with respect to its ostensible purpose: observers in the UK regularly argue that the outcome of these efforts is greater alienation among Muslim immigrants, not greater integration, that the main consequence is to draw attention to differences and increase the stigmatization of Muslims.

But again, even if these efforts succeed, they might do so only at a cost in terms of happiness. It's not merely a matter of the citizenship tests – for most people these are probably fairly innocuous (though it's a bit of a misnomer to call them citizenship tests – in the UK, at least, a passing score is now required not for naturalization but for a permanent residence visa, so repeated failure can result in losing one's ability to remain in the UK). If there were a negative consequence of British assimilationism for the happiness of immigrants, again I think it would come from the way this policy package has poisoned public discourse about immigrants and Muslims in the UK – and also has eaten up the policy space that might have been devoted to other ways of addressing Muslim marginalization, perhaps dealing with the high level of unemployment among young people who don't go to university or get other kinds of qualifications. This is, of course, a problem for White British young people as well, but for Muslims we can add the factor of employers' racism.

And so the final substantive point I'll make emerges in the suggestion that problems of identity among Muslims in the UK might not be? their problem at all, when we consider another way of looking at it – which is that perhaps it's actually a problem of some white people in the UK, people who can't conceive of any way of defining Britishness that doesn't include being white. In addition to the usual nonsense from the British National Party, we have a very recent expression of this attitude in comments by a producer of a British television program set in the English countryside – comments to the effect that it wouldn't work to have the show include ethnic minorities, that it wouldn't portray the English village if it did. Whether his implicit demographic statement is factually true is beside the point – what surely matters here is that his comment very likely reflects the attitudes of the show's viewers.

It isn't hard, then, to see the possibility that attitudes like this are responsible, in some measure, for the lower level of national identification among immigrants, especially British Muslims – and, perhaps, they also contribute to unhappiness, by fostering a sense of exclusion and rejection. So, perhaps we could imagine a way for research on identity to connect with happiness, by exploring possibilities for more open and inclusive modes of national identity among the majority population groups.

I hesitate to say more about this, for two reasons: one is that I'm already deep into a speculative mode of speaking, and we would surely want some better empirical grounding for these ideas. And second, it would no doubt be possible to find any number of unintended consequences for these ideas, along the lines that I suggested earlier in my discussion of assimilationist integration policies.

So I will close by returning to the more general idea, the suggestion that we might want to devote some effort and attention to considering the happiness implications of our research. Happiness is not the only goal people have for their lives, and Amartya Sen makes it clear that some forms of objective well-being are important, regardless of whether they bring happiness. But he makes that point mainly in relation to the satisfaction of basic human needs, the development of basic capabilities, and I'm not sure it applies to questions of identity. For identity, if we want to clarify for ourselves why it matters, then I wonder how successfully we could do that without asking about its consequences for happiness.

Now, it's pretty obvious that, in many respects, I have done little more than ask some questions along those lines, or perhaps, at best I've elaborated on what it might mean to ask them well. And perhaps there will be a sense that this kind of talk is a bit dissatisfying in this respect. Well, one reaction to dissatisfaction is to say to oneself *I can take that issue and make something of it*, *do a better job with it than he did* – and if that happens as a result of what I've done today then I'll really be quite pleased.

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