

**AN INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT +:
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROJECT ON HAPPINESS AND
HOW IT CAN IMPACT THE WORLD**

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ABSTRACT

Recent progress can help us better understand what allows human beings to maximize their enjoyment of life. At the same time, we are learning on the one hand that we cannot pursue our classical model of economic growth without changing our methods, due to the planet's ecological limitations and on the other hand the ineffectiveness of this path in terms of happiness. Thus, it is time to revisit the classical questions concerning happiness in view of the scientific progress gained in the last century, and particularly in the last 20 years. A multidisciplinary and multicultural research effort is necessary to combine the knowledge reached in disparate disciplines such as economics, philosophy, neurobiology, psychology, ecology, and sociology. From this multidisciplinary work operational conclusions could be made that would allow us to forge a happier future, avoid the mistakes of the past, and give our children a social model of happiness that is enthusiastic, balanced and sustainable. The means toward that goal will be to hold a series of meetings where a small group of scientists will work together in a free and creative manner. Having researchers from key branches of science work together is original and rare, and bears our hopes of new and long awaited discoveries.

INTRODUCTION

Conception of Project +

Project + is conceived from the following idea: Either at the individual or at the social group level, human beings reason, feel and make their decisions in relation to a key value whose realization they seek to maximize. In the case of the self-called developed societies, this value is the acquisition of the maximum wealth possible in terms of material goods [1, pp.31-32]. These material goods are expected to make people happy. In this way, one switches from a pursuit of one's being (being happy) to a quest of having (having more goods). Even though the pursuit of wealth is increasingly dominant throughout the world, its realization faces two major limitations: on the one hand, we understand that it does not necessarily improve happiness [2] [3] and, on the other hand, the path to growth inherent in this model carries very negative side-effects and implies many dangers (particularly when it comes to the depletion of the planet's resources and the wars and catastrophes it may cause) [4]. Hence, Project + questions what would happen if we were to focus primarily on one's being (being happy) without having to excessively or exclusively pass through the having (having more goods). Would this be an efficient way to solve some of our worst structural problems? At the same time, would this help each of us reach what we most dearly seek: happiness?

Contextual Framework

Project + is conceived from both historical and current frameworks. During the span of a few millennia, human beings evolved in a difficult, dangerous world they didn't understand. Their energy was spent on survival and competition and on eating as well as possible, and they experienced a constant need for more resources [5, pp. 16, 112, 122]. However, for the last few centuries the evolution of technology has allowed us to pursue a higher quality of life where the idea that salvation and happiness come only from God has grown increasingly out of date. Instead, a new idea has developed that posits that happiness is the result of an easier, more material-rich and safe life. Since the industrial revolution, the Western world has been able to provide essential, material needs for its population. The goal of obtaining food has thus ceased to be an obsession that demands the majority of people's time and energy. However, the dream of having more material wealth has remained even for those who have reached abundance [6]. Everything has taken place as if the progress-comfort ratio has surpassed the capacity of our

minds to erase the imprints of our past needs. According to Myers [7, p.526], one reason for this is that we tend to compare our material wealth with those who have more, not less, than we do. This tendency, referred to as “relative deprivation,” can make even very wealthy individuals feel disadvantaged. Thus, it appears that enjoying abundance is no longer sufficient. However, at almost the same time, we realize that the physical capacities of the planet do not allow for the continuation of our growth at this pace [4]. These recent changes in history have brought us to a unique moment in time that is distinct from all other phases in the history of humanity, and encourage us to redefine our goals.

Objectives of Project +

Project + investigates what would happen if one were to place happiness at the core of social organization rather than waiting for happiness to arrive as a side effect of comfortable or luxurious life conditions. The principle of Project + emanates from the following questions: What do we really know about research on happiness? What are the methods of finding happiness that work and that don't work? What do diverse disciplines have to say about the path to happiness? How can we integrate and summarize these different disciplines and enrich our knowledge through a scientific, in-depth and multidisciplinary dialogue? Such a summarization is the first objective of Project +. This summarization will reflect a comprehensive body of knowledge about individual and social happiness that has integrated current research and current and historical philosophies. This summarization will be multidisciplinary and multicultural.

The second objective is to look at the personal, social and political consequences of shifting from a goal of ever increasing wealth to a goal of optimized personal and social well being. Project + aims at facilitating an intellectual breakthrough by introducing a multidisciplinary approach to these traditional issues. Whereas in the past these questions were mostly left to isolated individuals, each working from a single perspective, we will now have a small group of collaborating scientists from key disciplines who can help generate new ideas and a new vision for our future well being. It is hoped that Project + will reach operational conclusions about how to achieve a balanced and enjoyable life, as well as create solutions to past or contemporary mistakes we've made while attempting to pursue happiness. This is quite different from most research, whose primary objective is to achieve credibility mainly through the production of reliable data, leaving to others the task of reaching practical conclusions. An important aspect of the project's “solutions” would be their ability to be effectively used by anyone in search of meaning, purpose or happiness in life.

Objective 1: The Summarization

The first objective is for researchers from disparate fields to create a comprehensive summary of the research on happiness. This promises to be a challenging task, since happiness research has greatly increased in the past 30 years (there are now a few thousand scientific articles on happiness), and because happiness does not constitute a coherent and structured field of study. In addition, several studies which use the term “happiness” often only deal with one small aspect of the broad topic, while other bodies of research concerned with happiness do not even mention the word “happiness” or include it as a key search term. It can be difficult to identify and summarize happiness research because many scientific articles related to the concept are dispersed, nonhomogeneous, redundant and sometimes lack relevance to the study of happiness. Thus, this first objective will be a significant undertaking. However, this task is imperative if we are to develop an understanding of the research that exists on happiness and, from this information, begin to develop a model of happiness that takes into account different perspectives from diverse disciplines.

The summary will be based partly on and hopes to contribute to research efforts undertaken by the Mind & Life Institute. It intends to create a multidisciplinary and multicultural summarization from which practical and operational conclusions can be created. The hope is that new ideas will emerge from this dialogue between scientists who usually do not have a chance to work together. These ideas may help us and future generations enjoy their life and find direction and meaning, while respecting others and the planet at the same time. Relevant disciplines to be represented in the summarization will include (but are not limited to):

Economics: Namely, to test the consequences of discoveries on the economic domain and to test their compatibility with our material world. Along the same vein, to understand the philosophies of different economic models, including those that are considered alternative. Also, to test the efficiency of any model that may result from ideas generated in the course of the research.

Ecology: A discipline that is equally important to highlight the limits that nature imposes on human activities. In this case, it will compare the long-term consequences of the social models being considered.

Medicine and neurobiology: These are clearly key disciplines whose recent discoveries give direction to the totality of Project +. This is mainly about the discussion of perspectives that open

up the capacity of the mind to be trained to achieve happiness. This is also to show how the ancient beliefs about the brain and innate character are insufficient.

Psychology: To discuss the knowledge gained about human happiness over about a century, emphasizing the recent discoveries regarding the human capacity to influence its own happiness in a voluntary and conscious way. The impact of our choices on our way of life and social models will be carefully examined. A point of particular importance will be the reconciliation between egoism (the individual search for one's happiness) and altruism (generosity and altruism as a precondition for happiness).

Moral/ethical philosophy: The presence of this discipline is important within the context of this research. Above all, this is not about reinventing the philosophical debates developed over centuries that have, in great measure, discussed the same subjects as Project +. The inclusion of philosophy is meant to provide a moral and ethical context to a discussion that is technical in nature and, unfortunately, runs the risk of being used toward destructive ends. Philosophy's role in the project is therefore to provide a level of security to the project, ensuring that its results be used for the good of society.

Another purpose of philosophical (and psychological) contributions will be to analyze counter-productive temptations. Individuals are often attracted to or moved by negative forces instead of seeking their own good for reasons that are not completely understood. Unfortunately moral, psychological and even religious doctrines have recommended paths to happiness which often do not inspire people to reject negative and destructive values. It is imperative that Project + does not ignore this tendency.

Religion, Meditation Practices, and Secular Morality: The theoretical and practical knowledge in these areas have much to teach us with regards to Project +, either in their failures or successes. The studies of Mind & Life have already made important advances. Individuals are often attracted to or moved by negative forces instead of seeking their own good for reasons that are not completely understood. Unfortunately moral, psychological and even religious doctrines have recommended paths to happiness which often do not inspire people to reject negative and destructive values.]]
ces in these areas.

In the course of working with experts from diverse disciplines on the subject of happiness, the goal will be to achieve a working summary of strategies that can lead to individual and societal

happiness. In addition, this summary hopes to identify strategies which are counter-productive (i.e. dangerous) to happiness in the long run. Finally, this summary will identify the current gaps in happiness literature across disciplines.

Objective 2: Practical Conclusions

It is hoped that from the summarization of happiness research we can formulate practical applications and methods for successfully pursuing happiness. It is likely that these methods will be comprised of a mixture of historically Western and Eastern approaches. The classical Western view of happiness contends that human beings must create exterior life conditions that are favorable to their happiness [8]. This can lead to counter-productive excesses when it comes to happiness at the individual or the collective levels. Other civilizations or older occidental philosophies, on the contrary, encourage human beings to seek happiness from within, without a strong focus on accumulating outside wealth [9]. It is likely that a happiness model will incorporate both internally and externally-oriented ideas of happiness.

This compromise between externally and internally-oriented approaches to happiness inspires hope that we can create paths to happiness that will be accessible and acceptable to the average individual and not only to ascetics and exceptional individuals. This is important because it's clear that, despite the several millennia of their existence, mystical or religious solutions have not yet convinced the majority of individuals to adopt them, most likely because of the rigorous demands they impose. For example, there are world-famous figures such as the Dalai Lama who model happiness, and who work hard to teach others how to become happy [8], but their methods are not easily or widely followed. In addition, in spite of recent films [10] and websites dedicated to examining the pursuit of happiness, an effective happiness model has yet to be created. It is therefore essential to find solutions that are accessible and useful to most individuals. Creating solutions that are partially externally-oriented and partially internally-oriented would be one way to accomplish a balance between individuals' concerns about comfort/safety and internal well being/happiness. Project + is based on the hope that a compromise between externally-oriented and internally-oriented approaches to happiness can lead to considerable, universal and long-lasting progress in the long run. Research and science will investigate this.

These operational solutions may also present the possibility of a true breakthrough in how we view the world because in addition to finding happiness, we may also identify the optimum level of happiness that we all need while allowing us to share and protect the planet's resources. In this

way we can not only make the most of happiness today, but we can preserve our future on this planet.

Finally, these solutions may help us understand why some countries are purportedly happier than others, even though their gross domestic product is not competitive with the wealthiest countries [11, pp. 312-314]. One explanation for this might be that the “happy” countries are able to utilize their economic resources more efficiently (happiness as an economic turbine) than other nations. Another conclusion may be that a high degree of economic development tends to actually generate unhappiness. These are all concerns that we hope to address with practical solutions.

Next Steps for Project +

Project + is currently in its naissance and is seeking experts from various academic disciplines to serve as contributors to upcoming interdisciplinary dialogues on happiness. These contributors, who will function as representatives of their respective fields, will meet twice a year to actively engage in these discussions, which will take place in a supportive, open-minded, and creative environment. The goal of these discussions is to make the best use of meetings with specialists of other fields of science, and to revisit traditional ideas about happiness in light of contemporary science and events. And of course, we hope to make breakthroughs about how to successfully attain happiness.

Initiating dialogue between experts on the topic of happiness is an original pursuit, not having been done anytime in the recent past, and it bears our hopes of new and long awaited discoveries. These discussions will give researchers the very unique opportunity to communicate with one another and share ideas, which is something that would rarely occur otherwise. It is with great enthusiasm that we begin Project +, and we look forward to meeting with researchers who are interested in contributing to the project.

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