

BOOK REVIEW

Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability: A Course in Systems Change

Authors: **Laura Musikanski, Rhonda Phillips, James Bradbury, John de Graaf and Clinton L. Bliss**

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Overview and Background Information

Sustainable tourism is a way of exploring a destination while respecting its culture, environment, and people. Sustainable tourism development is of utmost concern to the stakeholders of specific destinations, as the destination is also their home. For years academics, researchers, and even the stakeholders themselves, have viewed tourism as an industry, rather than as a system including elements that are mutually interconnected with stakeholders to achieve common goals. This system is called the tourism system. Understanding sustainable development as it relates

to the tourism system and changes within it, will benefit tourism stakeholders, both locally and globally, and is a key to successful sustainable tourism development.

Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability: A Course in Systems Change considers the concepts of positive psychology, sustainability, and the happiness movement, with approachable and actionable lessons, easily applied to the tourism system, as well as to daily life. The book provides a guide for college students studying tourism and other social science disciplines, to increase their skills, literacy, and knowledge, regarding the connections between a sense of well-being, and systems change.

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The book is broken down into seven chapters, covering the subjects of systems, values, measuring happiness, individual happiness, needs, sustainability, and policy. Each chapter includes discussions to explain, in approachable and accessible language, the topic and concepts involved within the context of systems thinking, followed by stimulating questions for students, ideas for group discussion, and additional research, as well as an extensive list of references.

This book provides students with lessons, exercises, and resources, that will make them happier, as well as motivating them to make career decisions that will help others and the planet, and empowering them to be forces for sustainability and social change.

The five authors are leaders in policy development, community development, and the happiness movement. Co-author, **Laura Musikanski**, is the highly respected executive director and co-founder of the Happiness Alliance and co-author of *The Happiness Policy Handbook*. Laura holds a JD and MBA. **Rhonda Phillips** is a community well-being development and planning specialist and the Dean of Purdue Honors College. She is a three-time Fulbright award recipient and author or editor of 28 books, including co-author of *The Happiness Policy Handbook*. Rhonda holds a PhD in city and regional planning and an MS in economics from the Georgia Institute of Technology. **James Bradbury** is a retired physicist, **John de Graaf** is

an internationally renowned author, speaker and producer, and **Clinton L. Bliss** is an administrator and practicing physician who works within the healthcare model of bio-psycho-social systems thinking. Most of the authors are on the board of directors of the Happiness Alliance, a nonprofit that provides tools and resources to inspire leadership in the happiness movement. The Happiness Index is a tool developed by the Happiness Alliance. The Happiness Index is a survey instrument that measures satisfaction with life, feelings, and flourishing, as well as life's circumstances (community, culture, economy, education, environment, government, health, social support, time balance and work), which anyone can take to get their own well-being assessment, available on the Happiness Alliance website (happycounts.org).

Review

Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability: A Course in Systems Change is the first textbook aimed at teaching college students the new science of happiness, well-being measurement, and lessons in the context of making positive and sustainable changes to society. It provides extensive and robust evidence of the theory and metrics underlying the well-being approach, and at the same time empowers the student in enacting systemic change in their lives and careers. It provides students with lessons on how to be

agents of their own destiny, and to use that agency to contribute to the well-being and sustainability of their societies. The authors put forward their broad objective very eloquently in the introduction by quoting Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” This coursebook provides the next generation with better tools to navigate and improve their collective futures.

It has long been clear that social change for sustainability requires inner change as well external action. This is the first book that makes this connection for students, raising many thought-provoking questions about how our personal happiness arises, and is connected to larger systems, policies, values, and social change. The authors use the term sustainability to mean the health of nature, on our planet now and in the future. They use the term happiness to encompass these concepts because they believe these concepts and individual happiness are inextricably connected, and rightly so.

Chapter one, **Systems** introduces the systems approach to readers. Your body is a system. Each person has a family system. For students, the university campus is a system, and for employees, their work-place is a system. Neighborhoods, towns and cities are systems. The economy and tourism operate as a system. Systems are dynamic and complex, and when any element of a system changes, the change has an impact on the whole system. This chapter explains how understanding systems helps build capacity for intentional and impactful

system change in one’s own life and in the world around oneself.

Income inequality, discussed by professor, researcher and author, Kate Pickett, in the guest coursebook contribution is particularly insightful. Income inequality and the unfair distribution of the benefits of tourism has long been one of the negative consequences of tourism development. The gap between the rich and poor, causes a wide range of health and social problems – from reduced life expectancy and higher infant mortality, to inferior educational opportunities, lower social mobility, and increased levels of violence.

Symptoms, patterns, design, and values are identified as entry points to systems change. The authors suggest that readers visualize the entry points to systems change as a pyramid. Values are the base of the pyramid, such that when this layer changes, design, patterns, and symptoms also change. Values are the strongest leverage points in systems. The top of the pyramid is identified as symptoms. Most of the time when this layer changes, the other layers do not change. Symptoms are the outcomes of a system. They are outcomes because they happen after the fact. An example of a symptom is a fever. Misery and poverty are also often symptoms. For students, their midterm grade is a symptom. It happens after the student studies, learns and takes the test.

The second chapter, **Values**, begins with a thought experiment.

Readers are encouraged to imagine a world in which their happiness, the well-being of others, and the sustainability of nature are primary considerations. The objectives of this chapter begin with an explanation of what values are. Knowing your own values helps you to understand how to discover and identify the values that are the foundation of a system and are upheld by that system. Several methods are suggested to help the reader identify their values.

Chapter 2 includes a figure detailing over 300 values to aid the reader in understanding, and suggests that readers rank the values that are important to them. This is helpful, because the reader can pick and choose their own values from the list. Chapter two explains research findings regarding ten values that are commonly held around the world: achievement, benevolence, conformity, hedonism, power, security, self-direction, stimulation, tradition, and universalism. The chapter ends with an exploration of the role of values in systems change. The concepts and examples in this chapter encourage governments to use happiness, well-being and sustainability measurements instead of gross domestic product (GDP) to influence people's values. When values change, people's behavior and actions also change.

Chapter two effectively uses two stories to illustrate the juxtaposition of societal values and happiness. A chapter highlight: Exploring Biases offers tools for understanding personal values as well as the values

of others. It is a reminder that measurements are determined based on what people value, and informs readers that values determine decisions, decisions determine actions, and that actions determine outcomes.

Measuring Happiness, the third chapter of the textbook, is a reminder of the old adage "You can't manage what you can't measure". The importance of measurement is discussed, as well as various methods to measure happiness. Many nations are already measuring happiness and well-being, with mixed results. Nations use a combination of subjective (asking people what they think) and objective (using data already gathered) indicators. In addition to objective and subjective data, there is a third way to define and measure happiness. This is called eudaimonia or flourishing. Eudaimonic data allows policy makers and others to understand what motivates people. The importance of reliable data should not be discounted. Data changes how policy makers make decisions, including budgeting, allocating resources, and engaging people.

This chapter provides three reasons to measure happiness. The first reason to measure happiness is that "what you measure is what you get". The second reason to measure happiness, say the authors, is because happiness is the purpose of government. The third and, possibly, most compelling reason that happiness should be measured is that using GDP as a proxy can lead to

unhappiness and undesirable outcomes for our communities, climate, and the planet.

The beginning of the chapter establishes that happiness can indeed be measured. The second half of the chapter explores how happiness may be measured, beginning with an introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators.

The authors state that researching happiness, well-being and sustainability through measurements identified as *subjective* can lead to misunderstanding. Surveys, polls and questionnaires are subjective, not because the information gathered from them is untrue or lacks usefulness, but because the information reflects what people think and feel. Conditions of happiness can also be measured with objective indicators. These are measurements of things such as income levels, health expectancy (the number of years that the average person is expected to remain healthy); employment; education levels; voting participation; rates of diagnosis of depression or other mental illness; toxicity levels in water, air and soil; and many other aspects of life that impact our happiness and well-being. The final story in chapter 3 illustrates to readers how happiness data regarding people's feelings can inform public policy and peoples' lives.

Chapter four, **Individual Happiness**, considers the concept from a personal paradigm. This chapter contains information and

resources for happiness skills development, separated into three sections, on mindfulness, gratitude, and generosity. Each section also contains an overview of researchers' findings and caveats. The chapter ends with a section on communication skills.

Dr Clinton Bliss, MD, one of the esteemed authors of this book, uses a bio-psycho-social model when treating patients. Dr Bliss considers patients' physical health, mental state, and life circumstances when developing treatments, explaining, "An important lesson about happiness is that to feel truly happy, you must also allow yourself to feel sad and all the other difficult feelings." Dr. Bliss created a grief process that he uses with his patients to help them find happiness when they are stuck in sadness, numbness or other difficult feelings such as anger, referred to as the Doctor Bliss Doctrine. Feel your feelings. Express your feelings. Consider the impacts of your options for action. The final stage of the Doctor Bliss doctrine is action. Act only after having fully felt and expressed your feelings, and considering your options.

The science behind mindfulness, gratitude and generosity is presented in chapter five. Scientific research tells us that practicing gratitude gives many of the same benefits as mindfulness and identifies two categories of gratitude practices: reflective and expressive. Reflective gratitude practices include gratitude journals, gratitude posts, and counting your blessings. Expressive

gratitude practices include saying thank you, gratitude letters, saying nice things about the people you love, and avoiding negative actions.

Research about generosity tells us that being generous leads to greater happiness. Generosity practices include spending your money on experiences rather than things, spending your money on donations rather than experiences, giving your time, and practicing random acts of kindness.

Chapter 5 closes with an examination of active listening. Active listening is listening to understand what people are saying and what they mean. This lesson breaks speaking into four steps: observing without judgment, stating your needs, stating your feelings, and stating your request. The chapter closes with a useful, individual happiness skills checklist and individual happiness exercises.

Needs are considered in chapter five. Starting with a discussion regarding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as well as the theories of Max-Neef and Wilber. All of these theories have in common an understanding that to meet needs, we need each other, and that how we understand our needs is the basis for whether (or not) we reach sustainability in our communities and on our planet.

Chapter six, **Sustainability** makes the argument that people experience satisfaction and happiness when they engage in sustainable practices, such as reducing carbon footprints, reducing the gap between

rich and poor, assisting the less fortunate, or developing innovative solutions to the problems that plague our planet. Sustainability and happiness are dependent upon our planet's natural, social, economic, and personal systems flourishing. This section briefly discusses some of the major challenges facing humanity, presented as stepping stones to encourage readers to think about the challenges in terms of the systems that created them and how the system could be redesigned to avoid ending up with the same or similar problems. At the end of each section, there are a few prompts for redesign and solutions.

The final chapter, **Policy**, identifies six general components of a policy. These include a statement of the purpose and intent, an explanation of the reason for the policy, strategies, measurements, resources, and finally, means of accountability. Via the use of a table, it considers actual policy concepts relating to five variables: human population, consumption of nonrenewable natural resources, food production, commercial production of goods and services, and lastly, pollution of the atmosphere, water, and soil. The three factors that provide happiness and well-being for cities, namely social offerings, openness, and beauty, are highlighted in this chapter.

The final section introduces the idea of happiness, well-being and sustainability policies, offering illustrations of these policies and ways that governments are

integrating happiness, well-being and sustainability into all aspects of government, and offers ideas on how to engage in policy making on large and small scales. The final exercises are aimed at identifying ways that governments may not have thought of, to affect organizational change, in the hope that the reader will continue this transformation.

The final lines of *Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability: A Course in Systems Change* leaves readers with four tips to improve their own happiness, ending with the sage advice, “Believe in yourself, in your values and dreams, and celebrate who you are. When you believe in and celebrate yourself, it is easier to see the good in others too.”

Recommendations

The flow of the book is especially conducive to classroom learning. Clear objectives and thought-provoking questions make for productive discussions. Chapters wisely begin with the necessary basics such as vocabulary, and an explanation of key concepts, providing a solid foundation for understanding

The happiness movement is a natural evolution of the sustainability movement and relates to the tourism system directly. This book offers compelling reasons to get involved with the science of happiness and making the creation of happiness, rather than GDP growth, the goal of governments and individuals, at a

global, regional, national and local level.

The website for this textbook [Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability course website](#) provides a wealth of information, containing videos, movies, reading material and website links to aid in understanding. For example, chapter one includes a link to a two minute video by Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* and Senior lecturer at MIT, which explains the concept of systems thinking clearly. Readers will also find a link to the video *The Story of Stuff* by Annie Leonard, which is a classroom resource designed to inspire discussion and aid understanding. The course is designed to inspire and empower students to be agents of change for positive social change. The guest coursebook contribution throughout the chapters provides valuable insight from well-regarded researchers and authors.

This book focuses on systems change for individuals and society. Sustainability in the tourism system is more important now than ever before, making the understanding of, and appreciation for, sustainable changes to the tourism system, of paramount importance. The authors encourage readers to apply the knowledge gathered about systems change to their own life as well as to the (tourism) systems in need of change. *Happiness, Well-being and Sustainability: A Course in Systems Change* can help college students live a life that brings them happiness and

contributes to the well-being of others, the sustainability of the tourism system, and the sustainability of our planet. The book will be of interest to students, teachers, and researchers of tourism as well as tourism professionals and stakeholders interested in sustainable tourism development.

The readability and practical exercises in the book will appeal to a much broader audience, including members of the general public who wish to pursue a happy life or wish for others to be happier while building a sustainable planet. Learning how to be happy is the most important lesson to be learned from this book. Aristotle wrote “happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence”.
