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# **The First Conference on the Economics of Happiness**

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# **Warwick Economics Research Papers**

# The First Conference on the Economics of Happiness

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## **Abstract**

In this short article I try to provide a description of the first conference on the economics of happiness. It was held in 1993 at the London School of Economics. In the ensuing three decades, a huge literature has emerged in this field. I attempt to offer a view on why this has happened.

It was a Thursday in November. London was chilly but dry. The year was 1993. Andrew Clark (then at the University of Essex) and I had been planning a conference for months. We had decided -- perhaps this was overly grand but we had no experience of organizing conferences -- to call it The Economics and Psychology of Happiness and Fairness<sup>1</sup>.

We had written to Daniel Kahneman at Princeton, Truman Bewley at Yale, Richard Freeman at Harvard, and Robert Frank at Cornell. All of them kindly agreed to give keynote talks. I believe this was the first occasion that the late Daniel Kahneman entered the London School of Economics. At that time, his name was not well known to most economists, but of course he went on later to win the Nobel Prize. Bewley, Freeman and Frank were, and are, distinguished economists.

Looking back, it would perhaps be fair to say that none of our keynote speakers were (at least at that point in time) experts on the economics of wellbeing. I suspect that Andrew Clark and I felt they could say interesting things about the topic of 'fairness' and, well, Andrew and I did not truly know what we were doing, to be honest, or even what the economics of happiness would ever look like. There was no master plan. I recall, as I write this, that Albert Einstein is reported to have said "If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?" and there seems to me a strong grain of truth in that statement.

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<sup>1</sup>\*A pdf of the original conference programme can be found at:  
<https://andrewoswald.com/docs/TheFirstConference-on-the-Economics-of-Happiness-LSE-year-1993.pdf>

I do remember thinking at the start of the 1990s that it was perplexing that economists did not study happiness. That did not make sense, I thought, especially as all economists learn about something called utility functions. But if any young researcher reads this short article, I would like to pass on to that person my feeling that fields of research just happen. They emerge from the ground up. That, I have come to believe, is why it is a mistake for universities and funding bodies to try to direct research in a top-down way. Top-down is almost always too late, too derivative, and too formulaic.

Amazingly, we did not invite Richard Easterlin (and I would like to dedicate this article to my late friend, who was the originator of what is now a field, I think it would be fair to say). Of course in 1993 it was years before the existence of the main internet; communication was poorer then; and, sadly, Andrew Clark and I assumed he was no longer working (or worse). Looking back from the year 2026, it is difficult to know how we came to that decision, but, as I explained above, we had no experience in running conferences.

Nor did we invite Bernard van Praag or Edward Diener, although years later I realised that we should have done. The field was not at all a well-defined one at that point in the early 1990s. I believe we did invite the distinguished psychologist Michael Argyle, but he declined.

On the day before the conference, Andrew Clark and I dragged 100 chairs into a large seminar room high up in one of the LSE's social-science buildings. I still

remember the heaviness of those traditional dark-wood chairs. Posters had been put up around the School. Everything was set.

What could go wrong, after all?

Unfortunately, a lot. The giant conference room remained almost empty for the rest of the two days.

My memory is not perfect, but as I recall only 8 people came. Nearly all of my LSE colleagues, some of whom had even tentatively signed up, found better things to do, and to my knowledge not a single student attended the conference. Even Richard Layard, who some years later became interested in the field, and eventually of course did significant work, stayed in his office down the same corridor for those days. He was focused on labour economics.

My economist colleagues at the London School of Economics may have thought that I was mad. But that is probably not the explanation. The truth, I suspect, is simpler. It is that our topic did not 'compute' for economists in the early 90s. It left them bewildered.

Apart from the keynote talks by the four Americans, Andrew Clark presented a paper on satisfaction and comparison income, and I talked about a paper (with David G Blanchflower) on the topic of wellbeing over time in Britain and the USA. Memorably, the latter took another 11 years to be published. Both these papers were rejected multiple times by economics journals, although both eventually

appeared -- perhaps surprisingly -- in the Journal of Public Economics (Clark & Oswald, 1996; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004)<sup>2</sup>.

Looking at the titles of the various talks and papers presented in the two-day conference, and checking today's electronic indexes, it is hard to judge exactly how many times the conference papers and talks were eventually cited by later researchers (partly because some were published under slightly different titles), but it appears to me to run into tens of thousands.

### Why did this field catch on in economics and in social science more broadly?

When one writes an academic paper, my experience is that one always hopes and perhaps thinks that the work will be important. Yet sometimes the paper does catch on and sometimes it disappears without trace. I have had some experience of the latter. It is never easy to know how scholarly attention will turn out in the future. Nor is publishing in a fancy journal a guarantee of impact on the profession, even though -- I think sadly -- many young researchers seem to end up being encouraged to focus on the name of a journal rather than on scientific substance per se. Richard Easterlin told me that no journal would publish his famous first article. The refereeing system is inherently conservative and can block real originality.

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<sup>2</sup>\*The 2004 paper at the start had a third author, the psychologist Peter Warr, a wonderful researcher, but eventually he generously withdrew his name because he felt he had not done sufficient work on the manuscript.

The editors of the new Journal of Wellbeing Economics asked me if I could say anything helpful about why the economics of wellbeing came to be a substantial area of research.<sup>3</sup> Although it is not easy to be certain, my own view is that the world started to pay attention to this field because it grapples with issues that matter deeply to regular citizens and because it reminds economists of the difference between means to an end (GDP, appropriate exchange rates, low inflation, and so on) and ends (human feelings).

Humans want to be happy. Thus they really care about the issues here -- and so do politicians. By using the data that had started to be available in the early 1990s, economists and other social scientists discovered patterns that people found intriguing and important. Economists were finally studying feelings.

By the mid-1990s, to my surprise, I was getting lots of requests to appear on radio and TV in order to answer questions about the economic and societal influences on human happiness. Magazines like The Economist published articles that explained to an international audience the findings that were being made in the field. I seem to remember that a Christmas issue of The Economist even had as its cover the topic of the U-shape in happiness through life.

I believe there was another -- more technocratic -- reason why the field caught on. To explain the background, when I was a graduate student at Oxford in the late 1970s I believe I wrote Fortran code and used punch cards for computing. One of

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<sup>3</sup>\*I thank Martijn Burger and Francesco Sarracino for helpful suggestions on this manuscript.

my doctoral chapters drew upon only 35 times-series observations, if I recall correctly. By the early 1990s, computer power had sky-rocketed, and we could handle datasets with many tens of thousands of observations. That meant we were able to see fairly persuasive patterns in micro-econometric data on human feelings.

Where might the field go in the future? The editors of this journal have asked me if I could speculate on that. That is hard. Major twists and turns in scientific endeavor can rarely be anticipated. However, let me offer three guesses. First, it may be that the economics of wellbeing will eventually merge with the natural sciences. That would happen if some kind of convincing biological marker for human happiness could be uncovered. Second, we are not the only sentient creatures on this planet. One day we will need to study, and care more about, the science of (non-human) animal feelings. Third, it is possible that the line between humans' feelings and machines' 'feelings' will grow increasingly blurry and increasingly fundamental to society (I thank my colleague Caspar Kaiser for fascinating discussions and his many innovative ideas on this latter topic).

In the year 2000, which is when I first met Richard Easterlin, at another conference on the economics of happiness (in Oxford)<sup>4</sup>, this area of social-science research had already become slightly more established. Governments were getting interested. In 2009 the famous Fitoussi-Sen-Stiglitz commission report was

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<sup>4</sup> The program of the Oxford conference can be found at: <https://andrewoswald.com/docs/Conference-2-on-the-Economics-of-Happiness-Oxford-2000.pdf>

published (Stiglitz et al., 2009). I served on the committee that produced that, and I still remember meetings in freezing offices in Paris where black-clad men with machine guns patrolled up and down outside. The References<sup>5</sup> at the end of this short paper give an introduction to Easterlin's work and some of the ideas that have been suggested about how governments might alter what they do to use wellbeing data in a more central way.

It was an honour to meet Richard Easterlin at that Oxford event. He was charming but direct. When we met, he gently explained to me that he assumed I was a somewhat minor researcher because my name always appeared after that of the well-known Andrew Clark.

I loved Richard Easterlin -- for his caring gentleness to nearly all of us, his intellectual brilliance and prescience, his courage in the face of decades of criticism, and his steadfast determination to point to facts revealed in longitudinal data. He was a remarkable iconoclast and I would like to dedicate this short article to his memory.

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<sup>5</sup> See Easterlin (1974; 1995; 2017), Easterlin et al., (2010), Easterlin & O'Connor (2022), O'Connor (2023), Sarracino & O'Connor (2025).

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