

Affluenza: A Review

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We are truly in a bad way emotionally ... Selfish Capitalism is not a good way to run things, if you care about people's emotional well-being. Affluenza, 2007

Affluenza by Oliver James is ranting, sensationalist, and journalistic. It is closer to a sermon than science. Nevertheless, Oliver James writes with clarity and panache, and much of Affluenza is a stimulating, if sometimes frustrating, read. More important, some of the claims in this book -- essentially a treatise about rising unhappiness in modern society -- are probably correct.

The idea promoted by Oliver James is that modern society is going to hell. Mental well-being is worsening through time¹. The reason is the virus of materialism. This virus is particularly prevalent in a country like the United States where everyone looks over their shoulder and wants to be richer than the neighbours. A nation like Denmark, by contrast, is organized more sensibly, is less unequal, and is therefore happier. We should aim to be like the Danes.

On one thing James is right. There is evidence that not all is well. Figure 1, for instance, plots annually for a representative random sample of about 10,000 Britons per annum a so-called GHQ psychological strain score. It is rising. Mental health in Great Britain, measured in this fairly standard way, is thus getting worse. More generally, going back to the seminal research by the economist Richard Easterlin of the University of Southern California, and from some later work in which I and colleagues had a hand, it has been known for some time that happiness and job-satisfaction levels have not increased in western society in the last few decades. Plus we know from Daniel Gilbert of Harvard's psychology department that people are bad at forecasting what will make them happy. Researchers are aware, too, from the writings of economists like Luttmer, that comparing oneself to others is responsible for a lot of unhappiness and subconscious jealousy. By looking at the lives of British babies born in 1958 compared to ones in 1970, moreover, Sacker and Wiggins have

¹ See also the interesting book by Avner Offer (2006).

provided us with some of the best evidence that levels of mental well-being are falling. Curiously, none of these writings, perhaps the reliable and influential ones in the field, is explained in Affluenza. Oliver James says rates of depression are going up. He is probably correct, but it would have been more even-handed if the author had cited inconvenient contrary evidence such as the work of Murphy et al and Paykel. A proper discussion of Denmark's high suicide rate might also have been sensible.

James blames capitalism. He wants to ban foreigners from owning the mass media in Britain, wants more generous time off from work for young parents, wants a society with lots of referenda, wants to prohibit the use of attractive men and women in advertisements, and wants education to be less focused on exam results and to be divorced from the needs of industry. I do not know of clinching evidence in support of the usefulness of these propositions (though some sound interesting ideas), and almost none is presented in the book. It is plausible, in my judgment, that the large amount of advertising in a country like the USA or Britain induces discontent and jealousy, and ultimately makes us all more miserable. But it has not been proven in the research literature. Similarly, the author's advice sounds intriguing on: 'If you can grasp the fact that modern education is largely about creating good little consumers and producers...you can start to feel better about yourself.' .297. And on: 'The key is to examine what it is about your work that you find truly interesting, and put that before pay and promotion..' p. 298.

On divorce and family break-up, Oliver James is particularly strident. His advice is to stick it out with your bride or groom. On average he may be right; this is a complicated area. Yet the latest research by Gardner, Hawkins, Stevenson and others has found that people often gain emotionally from divorce. Here we need much more research, and from disinterested statisticians and scientists.

On the problems caused by materialistic values, I have sympathy for Affluenza, although the quality of the causal evidence is not as strong as the author asserts. Nevertheless, if you can abide by James's suggestions -- admittedly not easy -- to compare yourself less to others, not to borrow large sums for a house, to grow up emotionally, to do your best to make your love-life work, to be more tolerant of your

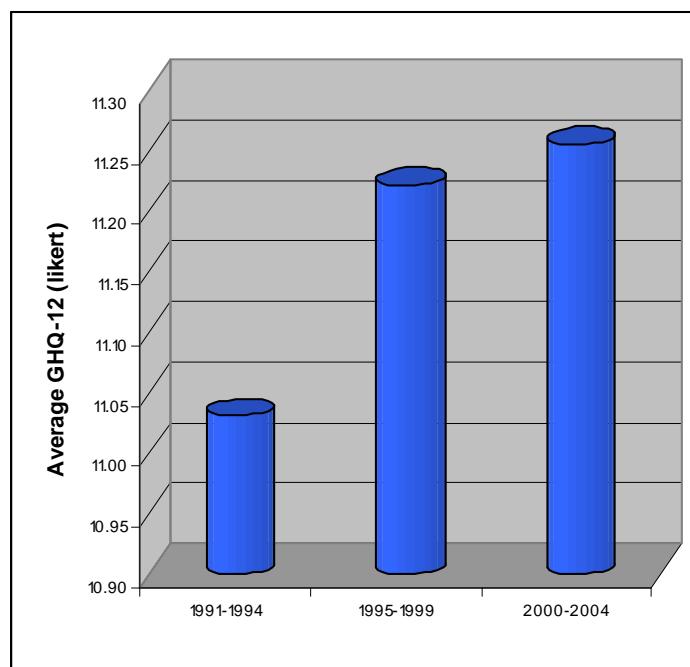
failings, and to get your deep psychological issues with your own parents sorted out with the help of a therapist, then perhaps you can learn to be happier.

Should you purchase this book? James writes well. If you already hate, or are suspicious of, the way that modern society is going, you are likely to enjoy the volume. If you wonder in an open-minded way whether we have taken a wrong turn in the way we live today, then, as long as you remember that the author is not a research scientist, and do not trust every statement and number in this book, I think it is worth buying. The issues discussed in Affluenza are important.

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Figure 1: Average GHQ-12 Psychological Distress Levels Over Time in Britain: BHPS, 1991-2004



Source: Oswald and Powdthavee (2007)

Note: A GHQ score, which is a standard measure of psychological ill-health, amalgamates answers to 12 separate mental-distress questions such as “Have you lost much sleep over worry?”, “Have you been feeling under strain?,” and “Have you been able to concentrate on things?”. The data come from the longitudinal British Household Panel Surveys.