Original Article

# Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality

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**Abstract**    Positive psychology and the new discourse on happiness that it brings represents an influential development in the field of psychology which has, in the short duration of its existence, grown into a powerful presence in the therapeutic culture of our time. This article examines this phenomenon from the standpoint of the theory of neoliberal governmentality, uncovering subtle and implicit logics of government centered on the production of a distinctly neoliberal subjectivity. Two principal points are advanced in this discussion: first, the relevance of govern-mentality theory to the study of positive psychology is argued on the basis of the need to theoretically explore the productivity of this discourse in shaping new subjectivities. Second, happiness itself, as an empirical case for governmentality theory, is argued to possess value for the rethinking of certain theoretical biases within the governmentality approach, which tend to emphasize rationality at the expense of emotions. These points are presented through theoretical arguments and the analysis of positive psychology texts.
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## Happiness and the Program of Neoliberal Governmentality

> 'happiness is a muscle you can strengthen'
> *Businessweek* article on positive psychology

Happiness, once an intangible attribute of individual temperament, has today emerged as an object of analytic clarity, measurable and actionable as never before. In recent years, new discourses on the form of happiness

have come from a range of professional fields centered on the problematics of human government: in economics, management, organizational theory, marketing and public policy, happiness has appeared as a thing with distinct contours and a precise internal mechanics, and thus as a point of application for programs aimed at the optimization, coordination and integration of human behaviors (Layard, 2005; Ben-Shahar, 2007). Today it is not unrealistic to speak of a 'technology of happiness' in human resource management, education, business and executive leadership, in family and marriage therapy, in career coaching, fitness and in all facets of personal life (Hamburg-Coplan, 2009). Moreover, at the leading edge of these developments are innovations in the emerging field of 'positive psychology', wherein personal happiness has achieved the highest level of transparency and plasticity as an object of positive science, clinical intervention and therapeutic manipulation. (Gable and Haidt, 2005). In what follows, an inquiry into the discourse of positive psychology will situate this emergent therapeutic discourse within contemporary configurations of power and emerging technologies for the management of subjectivity. Moreover, these technologies, it will be argued, operate within a network of strategies identified with neoliberal government. Building from Michel Foucault's formulation of an analytics of governmentality, and from the works of researchers in the developing field of governmentality studies that has grown up around Foucault's influential writings, the present investigation will consider contemporary formations of happiness as implicated in a more general logic of neoliberal subjectification (Foucault, 1991, 2007, 2008; Rose, 1998, 1999a, b; Rose *et al*, 2006; Holmer Nadesan, 2008).

Toward this end, the plan of the present study will advance two key points. First, the case will be made that the phenomenon of positive psychology and the new discourse on happiness exercises a uniquely productive effect in the shaping of autonomous, agentive neoliberal subjectivities, one that is not reducible to the obfuscations of ideology or the depersonalizing control mechanisms of the administered society typically invoked by critics of this new discourse. This point will be developed in parts 2 and 3, through a selective review of recent critical writings on happiness, followed by an analysis of the governmental logic of the happiness discourse. Second, it will be argued that the empirical case of happiness, and the productive government of emotional subjectivities it enables, raises critical questions that run to the heart of governmentality theory itself. Addressing an implicit bias within governmentality theory toward rational, cognitive, instrumental and calculative outlooks, a reflection on happiness considers the productive government of emotions for the window it opens on micro-practices of self-government, understood as intimate and personal enterprises. This point will be made in parts 4 and 5 of this article, through a short examination of a popular text on positive psychology. These points will be preceded, however,

by a short discussion of the rise of positive psychology as a powerful and influential force in contemporary therapeutic culture.

## The Rise of Positive Psychology and the New Discourse on Happiness

The new discourse on happiness represents a field that is singularly interdisciplinary, spanning scientific, economic, policy and journalistic enterprises, all of which exert a combined influence on lay and popular understandings that has become the stuff, not only of management and self-help books, but daytime talk shows, cable shows, and a burgeoning therapeutic subculture. Particularly important has been a tendency to view happiness through the framework of economic policy, as illustrated in the influential works of Richard Layard whose comparative global surveys of the happiness levels of countries across the world (reflecting his proposal for a Gross Happiness Index to supplement traditional measures of Gross Domestic Product) generate colorful maps which pique the curiosity of the most casual reader. (Layard, 2005; Midlands Psychology Group, 2007; Shaw and Taplin, 2007). Indeed, Layard's findings have proven influential, not only to a lay readership, but at the highest levels of government in some countries, influencing policy discussions in Britain, the United States and Australia. However, if inflections of economic thought lend an unmistakable coloring to the new discourse on happiness, it is without a doubt the work of innovative psychologists and therapists that have cemented the field's newfound celebrity. Among a select group of psychologists, the human propensity for emotional well being is being rethought along the lines of economizing principles, valued in terms of costs, benefits and enterprises, and made subject to a distinct set of economizing techniques. A close reading of positive psychology from the standpoint of the theory of governmentality reveals the distinct manner in which the rationalities of economic conduct presumed in the works of Layard and others animate the discussion on happiness as a problem for modern psychology.

The aim of positive psychology is to make people happy, with the aid of the most current techniques of psychological treatment. Aiming to surpass the traditional preoccupation of the psychological professions with negative states (neuroses, psychoses, disorders of various kinds), positive psychology maps out, with the same measure of scientific precision applied to mental pathologies, the psychological states identified with joy, flourishing, expressive well being and happiness itself. It is possible to date the origin of positive psychology to 1997, when Martin Seligman, renowned for his work on depression and adaptive behavior, and recently elected to the presidency of the American Psychological Association, joined forces with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, noted psychologist and originator of the concept of 'flow', the state of contemplative

immersion one attains in an all-consuming activity (Ruark, 2009). Both sought to redress the traditional preoccupation of American psychology with problems of disease and pathology by introducing a novel research agenda concentrated on those conditions that make individuals happy. With the intent of overcoming the vagaries and methodological flimsiness that had hampered previous efforts to treat the positive potentials of human well being (particularly those identified with the humanistic psychology of Maslow and Rogers), happiness, the two argued, could now be measured objectively and scientifically through empirical clinical research, and controlled through precise clinical techniques. Buoyed by their conversations, Seligman resolved to make positive psychology the theme for his tenure as president of the APA, and within a few years, the field had exploded.

Since the publication in 2000 of Seligman's best-selling work *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, the undisputed Holy Writ of this budding field, the new discourse on happiness has developed into a dynamic cultural phenomenon, earning repute both within academic psychology and in a variety of applied fields from business and public policy to the heady world of self-help publishing (Seligman, 2000). The creation of the Templeton Prizes in Positive Psychology, two special issues of the *American Psychologist*, a number of handbooks devoted to the topic, several summits and a major international conference all occurred within five years of the initial conversations between the field's founders. And in the decade since the publication of Seligman's book, positive psychology has consolidated its hold on academic psychology. Competitive programs in positive psychology have been established at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University and the University of East London; Csikszentmihalyi himself has founded a PhD program in positive psychology at Claremont University, and course offerings in positive psychology have become the norm in leading departments worldwide. Financial support for research has also grown rapidly: in addition to recent infusions of support from the National Science Foundation and the US Department of Education, funding in excess of US$226 000 000 has been provided to positive psychology researchers by the National Institute of Mental Health (Wallis, 2005; Ruark, 2009). Also, in addition to the $200 000 prizes it has awarded since 2000, The John Templeton Foundation recently offered Seligman a $6 000 000 grant to encourage collaborative research across the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience.

The new discourse on happiness has influenced a range of institutional, managerial and planning activities, variously centered on the government of individuals, communities and organizations through appeals to their capacity to perceive situations positively. At the center of these efforts is the belief that happiness results from the cognitive outlooks of individuals: to the extent that people can be brought to assess their situations and themselves in a favorable

light, the resulting emotional flush will move them to perform on such a superior level as to confirm this initial positive view. The task, then, is to create the conditions, or to teach the specific techniques, whereby circumstantial optimism and appreciative self-regard can be intentionally cultivated by individuals themselves. Significantly, this is undertaken neither through a treatment regimen, counseling, nor any therapeutic practice requiring the supervision of an institutional expert of any kind. The cultivation of the happy life is a project undertaken in the intimate space of everyday life, albeit through the use of techniques gleaned from the expert discourse of positive psychology. One example of an institutional application of positive psychology is that of 'positive education', developed by Seligman at the Center for Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, which has since been adopted by schools in the United States, Britain and Australia. (Waite, 2007; Seligman *et al*, 2009). Rather than castigating students for their weaknesses and flaws, the curriculum asks students to appreciate their unique strengths and assets, and includes specific methods by which students cultivate and sustain this self-regard in their own lives – a lesson that concludes with end-of-day gratitude reflections designed to enhance positive outlooks. Similarly, business has welcomed the influence of positive psychology and incorporated its appreciative regard for the positive functions of organizations and enterprises as a tool for management: the business school at the University of Michigan in 2002 created a program in Positive Organizational Scholarship and, in 2004, Case Western Reserve University created a similar program in Positive Organizational Development. Business leaders are taught to view the potentials and assets of organizations and their staffs, while imparting to workers small techniques for the enhancement of such appreciative outlooks woven into the patterns of their daily rounds. These range from keeping records of their own and other's professional accomplishments to the ritual acknowledgment, at the start of staff meetings, of organizational successes and strengths. Graduates from these programs have brought the assets of positive psychology to firms such as Ann Taylor Stores and Toyota Motor Company (Hamburg-Coplan, 2009).

Most impressive, however, is the success of positive psychology as a popular cultural and media phenomenon. Regional and national happiness rankings have proven attractive to readers and viewers worldwide, and a *Time Magazine* article on positive psychology, declaring it the 'science of happiness', expanded public curiosity on this phenomenon (Wallis, 2005). Professor Tal Ben-Shahar's positive psychology class (from which he developed materials for his best-selling book, *Happier: Learn the Secrets of Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*) has been widely acclaimed as the most popular class at Harvard University (Ben-Shahar, 2007). And on the self-help shelves dozens of titles brandishing the scientific credential of the new psychology strive to set themselves apart from the mushier offerings of self-help and new

age gurus: a cover story in *Psychology Today* reports that, while in 2000 only 50 new popular nonfiction titles addressed the topic of happiness, by 2008 that number had grown to 4000 (Flora, 2009). Positive psychology has also had a dramatic impact on therapeutic practices outside professional channels: a Google search of such terms as 'happiness' and 'positive psychology' reveals a growing cottage industry of happiness coaches, consultants and business visionaries who have turned to the positive psychology brand as the elixir for all that ails modern life. In the face of online services, blogs, cable TV programs, counseling and management publications, and therapeutic circles, it is not an overstatement to speak of a happiness movement, with positive psychology at its leading edge.

Conceptually, the core elements of positive psychology are relatively easy to grasp, owing to the field's penchant for the popular psychology genre: drawing on the legacy of humanistic psychology, positive psychologists refute the pessimism of the 'adaptive' tradition, and focus on the life affirming potentials, energies and vital forces residing within the individual psyche. Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and proponents of the movement for self-realization in the 1960s and 1970s had argued for the need to overcome the self-recrimination imposed on the individual by demanding social norms, and embrace the unconditional acceptance of the individual through a client-centered psycho-therapy (Froh, 2004). Positive psychology is similar in its optimistic portrayal of happiness as a radiant personal potential, although in this case the therapeutic task is radically disengaged from social relations in general and turned over to the individual himself, who is taught to maximize happy emotions through the direct manipulation of his own thoughts – a characteristic positive psychology inherits from its other great forbearer, cognitive behavioral psychology. Cognitivist approaches typically reverse the old Freudian axiom that thoughts are the expression of underlying emotional dynamics, which are themselves rooted in psycho-biographical experiences. Instead, everyday thoughts are understood to determine emotional states, and where these thoughts can be directly manipulated by sheer acts of will (making oneself think about this or that). It follows that happiness can be produced by consciously directing one's thoughts to happy subjects, with the same intentionality one might pursue in a fitness regime. Positive psychologists provide reams of advice on how this is to be done: through thought interventions one learns to switch off negative thought patterns, through planned disruptions to one's routine one learns to forestall the cyclical downward spiral to lower emotional states ('hedonic adaptation') that grips us all in the rhythm of daily life. Indeed, together with new clinical methodologies for the specific measurement of emotional states, wide authority is granted to the individual for the adjustment and manipulation of a static value – one's happiness – whose intensity can be determined numerically from moment to moment – through the control of one's thoughts (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

All of this comes together to shape an infectious discourse on the promise of individual happiness that is both uplifting and technical, both shrouded in science and seemingly able to extend to the most mundane moments of personal life. Happiness is validated both as a task of medical intervention whose fluctuations can be quantitatively measured, and an undertaking as intimate and ongoing as a personal hobby, expressed in the myriad exercises and routine adjustments to our subjective happiness level related in positive psychology's emotional regime. One example helps to clarify positive psychology's view on happiness as a plastic medium: the Happiness iPhone application, downloadable from happier.com. When launched, the software prompts users with a set of questions aimed at measuring one's current state of happiness: 'How happy are you right now?' 'Would you say your life is as good as it could be?' and so on, all of which can be scored on a scale from 1 to 5. The application, which downloads with a video message from Martin Seligman himself, plots fluctuating levels of happiness on a chart, allowing an immediate and convenient overview of one's weekly and monthly levels of happiness.

Taken together, the new discourse on happiness represents a dramatic new presence in the therapeutic culture of our time, whose effects, it can be argued, are uniquely productive: through repetitive intervention in one's own patterns of daily thought, a new emotional state is slowly cultivated, gradually brought into existence as the manipulation of affect assumes a positive form. But before we can uncover the links that bind this new discourse and the unique modes of self awareness it produces with the larger matrix of practices, expectations and self-understandings we call neoliberalism, it is first necessary to elaborate on the unique value of the governmentality perspective as applied to the problem of psychology and emotional life, and explain the relevance of this method to the study of happiness.

## The Production of Happy Subjects

The preoccupation of modern societies with the intentional production of human happiness has long been demeaned in social science literature as a dangerous byproduct of the march of societal modernization, and the emergence of an ever more advanced stage of capitalist development. At the center of this anxiety is an enduring concern with the relationship between culture and economy, and the extent to which former, as that domain of emotional life, is unduly deployed as the errand boy of latter. This criticism is familiar to readers in such familiar epithets as 'narcissism' or 'repressive desublimation', or in C. Wright Mills's uniquely unflattering characterization of the over-administered individual as a 'cheerful robot', product of a capitalist bureaucratic society (Wright Mills, 1959, p. 176; Marcuse, 1964, p. 59;

Lasch, 1979). Moreover, this criticism is not restricted to any ideological camp: while conservatives have long lamented the hedonistic demise of civic character brought on by rising rates of consumption (Bell, 1978), those on the left have decried the secular and psychological pursuit of happiness as an obfuscation imposed by the captains of industry, eclipsing the critical capacities that inform radical agency (Ewen, 1976). These criticisms have been renewed in recent years as innovations in the field of applied psychology and self-help have forged a new culture of personal happiness, which, it is alleged, reflect the imperatives and effects of wider economic developments in novel ways. Indeed, an entire critical scholarship on the contemporary preoccupation with happiness has engaged the problematic of culture and economy, although governmentality research remains notably absent from these debates.

Barbara Ehrenreich's recent book, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, extends the left version of this critique, linking the compulsory optimism implicit within happiness discourse to a neoconservative political agenda with thinly veiled corporate aims, resulting in such Bush era foibles as Enron, the invasion of Iraq and the economic meltdown of 2007 (Ehrenreich, 2009). Pollyannaism in the boardroom, Ehrenreich argues, is reflected in the privatization of workplace angst and the suppression of its collectivizing potential. Ehrenreich's investigative analysis of the positive psychology movement, gathered from interviews with positive psychology luminaries (including Seligman) and field work at positive psychology conferences uncovers not just the institutional support the field enjoys from right-wing, business-leaning groups such as the John Templeton Foundation, but the ideological bias rooted in the very image of human happiness itself: 'The real conservativism of positive psychology', writes Ehrenreich, 'lies in its attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power' (p. 170).

Another tendency in the critical literature on the new happiness discourse is one whose stake is less with a threatened sociality than with the need to rescue the true content of existential well being from the myopic platitudes of the evangelizers and sloganeers of positive psychology, whose one-sided devotion to a truncated subjectivity fundamentally elides psychological depth and human significance. If the first line of criticism is manipulationist, this second line is resolutely romanticist and humanist, as evidenced in Eric Wilson's *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*, for whom melancholia serves as the threatened aesthetic and creative crucible of a romantic subjectivity. For Wilson, the 'predominant form of American happiness breeds blandness. … this brand of supposed joy, moreover, seems to foster an ongoing ignorance of life's enduring and vital polarity between agony and ecstasy, dejection and ebullience' (Wilson, 2008, p. 7). Similarly, Ariel Gore's *Bluebird: Women and the New Psychology of Happiness*, brings a feminist critique to positive psychology while searching for an authentic condition of

feminist well being (Gore, 2010). Similar concerns with the authenticity of the new discourse on happiness are reflected in those critical voices within the psychological profession itself, which contest key assumptions and findings of positive psychology on the basis of the field's inadequacy to the curative task of the psychological enterprise, and particularly to the field's blurring of traditional distinctions between healthy and pathological states (Lazarus, 2003; Miller, 2008). Again, the governmentality approach poses no necessary disagreement with these concerns, only to point out that the problem itself – the authentic wellbeing of the individual as a problem of deep interiority or external manipulation – has a double life both as an enduring existential concern, but also, in the new discourse on happiness, as a technology of rule, whose effects are largely productive of those very affective subjectivities to which they purport to attend.

There are, however, two critical traditions engaging the contemporary problem of happiness that are perhaps closer in spirit to the present study: on the one hand, the work of cultural studies scholars brings a sensitivity to the power dynamics of popular media phenomenon, while on the other hand, critical psychology provides insight into the institutional functions of the psychological enterprise within advanced capitalist societies. The former is exemplified in the work of Sara Ahmed and others, whose studies of happiness marshal the skepticism for ontological claims, and a studied attention to the political appropriation of foundational categories of self-identity that is at the core of cultural studies methodology (Ahmed, 2008, 2010). Similarly, critical psychology, whose theoretical origins are principally with Marxian critical theory (although the methods of governmentality researchers are today more frequently invoked), proceeds along similar lines, albeit with a concentration less on popular culture than on the institutional form of professional psychology itself (Prilleltensky and Nelson, 2002; Hook, 2007). These two traditions expand the critical repertoire of the manipulationist perspective with a more refined grasp of identities and institutions, implicating happiness in wider strategies of social power while breaking from the cultural reductionism implied in earlier critical approaches.

Ahmed's work in particular is illustrative of this tendency, and is for this reason deserving of further consideration. In two critical works, the first an edited issue of the journal *New Formations*, the second a book-length study titled *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed takes stock of the contemporary import of happiness discourse in a range of cultural and social contexts, spanning the explosive theme of happiness in self-help and therapeutic literature to more narrative invocations in popular films, novels and television. The 'happiness turn' Ahmed explores in both works draws on the ubiquity of the term itself, and specifically its constitutive effect in valorizing certain practices and lifestyles – and by implication, social groups – deemed capable of producing happiness. Ahmed's method is one that brings

together a sensitivity to the power of symbols and cultural texts with an awareness of the hierarchical relations between social categories, and the necessity for certain constellations of power to produce as naturalized and thus uncontestable specific categories of social membership. Moreover, Ahmed brings to this methodology a distinctly phenomenological sense of the effect of objects or practices deemed happy, or happiness-producing, to naturalize the status and privilege of certain social identities through their association with the uncontestably good quality of happiness. Happiness is both the desired object, but also the enabling condition for attaining such an object, so to reject the object is to admit the deficits of one's own happiness. As happiness becomes the unquestioned good, so the happy become good in all they are and do. Or as Ahmed put it: 'When happiness is assumed to be a self-evident good, then it becomes evidence of the good'. Yet through her own critical work of phenomenological suspension, 'we can consider not only what makes happiness good but how happiness participates in making things good' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 13).

This point is played out to great benefit for Ahmed and the authors whose work she links to the critical study of the happiness turn. In these works, a genealogy of happiness proceeds precisely through the uncovering of its absence, in that range of subjects and social groups deemed unhappy through their maladjustment or alienation from the places, things and practices that bring happiness. According to the logic of this discourse, the family has been 'shown' (according to some methodology) to make people happy – a point made self-evident by the many women who find happiness in the role of wife and mother. And the feminist critique of these roles, which alleges servitude and secret suffering, becomes, by definition, a characterological symptom of an unhappy person, who, were they better able to achieve happiness in their own lives, would certainly see things differently. The feminist killjoy is absorbed in the circular invocation of happiness as *the* undisputed good, the optimal object folded into the facilitating state of mind for attaining such objects, but also as the legitimating sign of a social membership from which feminists, consumed by pessimism and the absence of happiness, are excluded. The same applies to unhappy queers and melancholic immigrants, whose exile from happiness axiomatically affirms their status as bad subjects whose lives are consumed by both misplaced methods and goals.

What the happiness turn (as both a cultural phenomenon and a critical enterprise) offers us is a culturalist ideology critique, centered on emotions as identity resources and as cultural assets, realized through a critical reading of cultural texts. In one example from Ahmed's *New Formations* collection, Heather Love offers a critique of the implicit 'homonormativity' of gay culture, increasingly satiated with images of happiness replicated from heterosexual norms (Love, 2008). Particularly in the case of an identity long associated with mal-adaption and private misery, the new

homonormativity demands redoubled efforts on the part of queers to produce a happiness comparable to their heterosexual counterparts, and, most importantly, to publicly expunge any melancholy from their own lives that might summon up memories of older gay emotional styles. In her essay, 'Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence', Love traces this conformism through an eloquent analysis of Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain*, the painful story of tragic love between two sheepherders in the American West, which invokes a certain fantasy image of the happy gay marriage, only to resort finally to more traditional representations of gay love as an occasion for suffering. Love finds in Lee's film not a retrograde characterization of the tragic gay life, but an escape from the cultural mainstreaming of gay partnering with its appeal to homonormative happiness, and the welcome invocation of an emotional richness and outsiderness that, she argues, has long been part of queer subjectivity. This culturalist methodology is apparent elsewhere in the *New Formations* volume, in, for example, studies of Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas's queer autobiographical work *Before Night Falls*, as well as the works of Herman Melville, the film *Bend it Like Beckham*, the popular concern with gambling and the songs of Morrissey.

What, then, does the governmentality perspective bring to the happiness turn that is not already supplied in such rich and diverse cultural readings? Briefly stated, the governmentality problematic, adapted for the purposes of cultural analysis, draws out those prescriptive, reflexive and instrumental dimensions of the happiness turn whereby subjects are induced to work on themselves and their emotional states as open-ended problems of self-government. I would propose that certain varieties of cultural texts operate in ways that demand theoretical instruments sensitized to their effects: self-help literatures, popular psychologies, therapeutic discourses and reflexive life-style programs should not be casually read alongside art, music and film, as these texts do more than establish background understandings and cultural resources for the validation of social identities. These texts serve the added function of producing subjectivities themselves by situating a specific agency and autonomy. They prescribe specific modes of self-awareness and everyday practice for the enactment of subjectivities adequate to the ends of governmental strategies that span the public and the private. In other words, it is worth distinguishing cultural texts, in the broad sense, from those prescriptive texts that compose governmental rationalities, if only ideal typically. The productivity of happiness discourse that the governmentality method reveals is one that presents a very different articulation, not only of emotional self-management and popular culture, but of happiness as an effect of other economic processes. In short, the governmentality literature, through its focus on techniques and rationalities of practice, sensitizes us to the homologous correspondence that operates between the government of

emotional life and contemporary logics of capital associated with neoliberal economic policy.

While an expansive secondary literature on neoliberal governmentality is already familiar to many readers, certain select themes can be mentioned for the purposes of the present discussion. First, governmentality, as the term was developed by Foucault, describes a confluence between those micro-technologies by which individuals relate to and govern themselves, and the macro-technologies by which states and social authorities govern groups, institutions and populations (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999). In this way, the problem of happiness is not foreign to governmentality theory, even as Foucault initially described it. The early modern state, Foucault wrote, sought to strengthen itself through the optimization of the productive capacities of the population, which meant the effective government of popular happiness, since the productivity of its people was directly tied to the popular level contentedness (Foucault, 1988). 'Happiness of individuals is a requirement for the survival and development of the state', Foucault explained: 'It is an instrument, and not simply a consequence' (p. 158).

In the case of neoliberal governmentality, it can be argued, happiness remains an instrument, but of a different kind. No longer an instrument for the strengthening of the state, today, happiness is more than ever tied to economic freedom and the inclination to act in one's own self interest. The logics imposed through contemporary technologies of happiness and practiced by individuals in their own self-government are specifically centered on the production – or, more accurately, through the inducement to self production – of a distinct form of enterprise. Neoliberal governmentality, therefore, involves the process by which individuals are induced to cultivate within themselves the entrepreneurial, autonomous dispositions mandated by a wider economic rationality – a project that expands to incorporate wide and varied aspects of conduct, personality and everyday life far beyond economic practice in the narrow sense (Binkley, 2009a, b, 2011).

Moreover, neoliberal government operates through the excitation of a force of freedom and autonomy within individuals themselves, one that takes the form of a compulsory differentiation of the individual within a social field, conceived according to the model of an open market. With freedom as its object, neoliberal governmentality designates a matrix of institutions, practices and discourses which exert rule through the apparent absence of rule, or government through the active problematization and curtailment of any form of government thought to impose limits upon the freedom of the individual to differentiate and maximize her own qualities for competitive advantage. This freedom is the freedom to competitively develop unique and personal potentials that might ensure a more strategic market position, where all social relations and fields are now understood on the model of the market. The affecting of neoliberal subjects, or subjectification, in other

words, disposes individuals to act strategically to develop themselves and their qualities as human capital within a field of competitive actors, seeking opportunity and advantage through the critical assessment of environmental opportunities. However, through the lens of neoliberalism, constraints on the autonomous drive to competitive differentiation emerge from that domain identified with the social, and in particular from the custodial functions exercised over the social by the modern welfare state, which variously fosters social embeddedness, solidarity and reliance on institutions and social dependency within a population. This is a state which governs too much, and in opposition to which neoliberal government stands out as the art of governing less. Therefore, neoliberal government fosters a specific freedom through the reversal of those dependencies imposed by the social: it sets out with the ostensible goal of maximizing the freedom of enterprise by minimizing the constraints of government. Neoliberal governmentality instills and mobilizes autonomy and freedom within individuals by limiting the collectivizing influence of the state, and the dependencies that develop through forms of social membership. The reduction of this burden is coextensive with the production of individual autonomy, or personal freedom, which is in principle the key ethical task of neoliberal government: the stripping from oneself of the inertia, complacency and dormancy imposed by social forms, and the cultivation within oneself of an autonomous spirit of enterprise.

Dependence upon the judgment of others, the propensity to adhere to institutional protocols, reflective docility, unexamined habitual behaviors, any form of collective behavior or a predisposition to take responsibility for the welfare of others (for reasons other than the hedonistic rewards such responsibilities yield), is regarded as problematic, as an outgrowth of the overextension of some other regime of (welfarist, social) government. Through the lens of neoliberalism, these qualities signal a failure of personal freedom, an obstruction to the voluntaristic, self-interested, enterprising conduct that is the wellspring of (neoliberal) happiness itself. In other words, neoliberal subjectification is government through the production of freedom: it is the exercise of productive power through the establishment of those unique conditions under which individuals take responsibility for the government of themselves as free, self-interested and enterprising actors (Burchell, 1996). The current discourse on happiness serves as one framework through which individuals undertake to problematize those agencies, both internal and external, that endeavor to govern too much. Indeed, such agencies appear as the *bêtes noires* of the discourse on happiness – forces that choke off happiness itself by deadening the impulsive freedom that drives the entrepreneurial subject toward the maximization of his own emotional life, viewed as human capital. An inquiry into the specific logic of the happiness discourse reveals this program at work.

### The Logic of Happiness

Positive psychology presents a loose amalgam of psychological approaches centered on what it claims is an entirely novel clinical object: the potential for optimal human emotional performance, or 'flourishing', among people displaying no specific signs of mental suffering or ailment. Drawing together elements from humanistic and cognitive behavioral psychologies, positive psychologists have proposed a scientifically grounded view of the individual that is basically optimistic: the potential for happiness is something possessed by all, it is a thing that can be objectified, mapped, manipulated and measured (largely through the use of questionnaires and self-surveys), and people can learn to do this manipulation in their own time with a minimum of expert supervision. Yet positive psychology also employs a strikingly truncated view of the human psyche, one that specifically disavows any association with the depth models of psycho-dynamic psychology, regression analysis, or any method that appeals to the unconscious or to the significance of early childhood. Employing a cognitive behaviorist framework, positive psychology appeals to the specifically conscious thought processes by which emotional states are shaped as the raw material for psychological manipulation. Positive psychological exercises typically center on the intentional reshaping of the negative thoughts that might lead to states of unhappiness: the keeping of 'gratitude journals', the noting and recording of positive characteristics of one's life and of oneself, the conscious carrying out of benevolent activities meant to awaken one to the moral richness of one's experiences and so on. Indeed, the happy subject is encouraged to look opportunistically at the question of her own circumstances and environment, to take a proactive stance in maximizing her own happiness within any unique situation. Essentially, these are thought exercises, carried out not in service to any vision of the social good, but strategically, for the private rewards they bring in the volume and intensity of one's satisfaction with life.

Moreover, positive psychology proposes specific methods for the enhancement, not just of states of positive feeling in moment-to-moment life (hedonic pleasure) but the deeper forms of happiness that derive from the exercise of our chief potentials and unique gifts as individuals (eudaimonic happiness). This kind of happiness, termed 'authentic happiness' by Martin Seligman, occurs when a particular set of psychological strengths and virtues unique to each individual are mobilized and put into operation in everyday activities: qualities such as courage, conviction and open-mindedness, whose development through practice in everyday life induces positive emotional states (Seligman, 2000). Seligman recounts the process by which these qualities were arrived at in the development of positive psychology: together with a colleague, Seligman combed through the 'basic writings of all the major religious and philosophical traditions … Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, Augustine,

the Old Testament, the Talmud, Confucius, Buddha, Lao-Tze, Bushido, the Koran, Benjamin Franklin ...' (p. 132) to track the recurrence of distinctive positive traits. What emerged was a list of universally held 'signature strengths', which include: Wisdom, Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence. Seligman went on to catalog these qualities in what he termed the Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook, or CSV, which he proposes as positive psychology's alternative to the inventory of pathological states numbered in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM (Maddux, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

At the foundation of positive psychology, then, is a deep belief in the plasticity of emotional states, and in the opportunistic conduct of the happy subject as one susceptible to the suggestive power of optimistic and pessimistic thought: negative emotional states derive from the perception of one's own helplessness to make oneself happy, the inability to transcend one's routines or an over-dependence on the emotional patterns that develop from unexamined, shared, social life. Positive emotions, on the other hand, come with the embrace of one's power to change one's emotional well being, and with the assumption of responsibility for those emotions. In the first case, one is unhappy, and believes that one cannot act to make oneself happy because one is too rooted in one's way of life, which makes one more unhappy. In the second, one sees that one can escape the limits imposed by a socially embedded life, which gives one a sensation of emotional exhilaration, which itself motivates action and brings about a real happier situation. Therefore unhappiness is synonymous with the inability to act on one's own: to the extent that one realizes that one can make oneself happy through one's own actions, one becomes happy. Agency, enterprise and responsibility for oneself are both the means and the content of happiness itself – freedom as an attribute of individual conduct. The realization that happiness is within one's reach is a perception that is realized through the taking of actions toward happiness (a point that is demonstrated in a statement on the website of a prominent positive psychologist, who describes critics of her happiness program as 'pessimistic'). And by extension, the spiral of docility, resignation, the reluctance to act on one's own, signal, not only the absence of happiness, but the inhibition and retardation of the potential for happiness – the vital, enterprising spirit that is the wellspring of neoliberal subjectivity, or freedom. Thus, the docility of social dependency, and the negative thoughts that lull us into states of torpor, must be actively uprooted and transformed through an infusion of affirming optimism. The logic of happiness demands that the happy subject train her efforts on this object that obstructs and obscures the agency, activity and freedom to act in one's own interest that is happiness itself: the thoughts and habits that embed the individual in patterned social life. Such is the productive effect of

the discourse on happiness, whereby happiness itself stands in for the freedom of the entrepreneurial subject.

Yet there is more at stake here than an expansion of the critical wherewithal for a renewed attack on happiness. To consider the second general point indicated earlier – the theoretical value implied by the empirical case of happiness discourse for a critical rethinking of certain rational, cognitive and calculative biases within governmentality theory itself – a wider consideration of the theory of governmentality is required.

## Emotions and the Doubling of Neoliberal Governmentality

As stated earlier, a theory of social power, governmentality establishes homologies between micro and macro levels of rule: the rationalities by which social authorities rule over others are reproduced in the intimate ways individuals set about to rule themselves. Yet within governmentality studies, institutional, macro level thought processes are given priority, while this point of transmutation between macro and micro remains obscure and poorly understood, suggesting that the intimate space of the government of oneself is simply a mirroring of broader governmental policies and the rationalities they impose. Yet questions persist about this space between macro and micro levels: how does a technology for the government of others double itself in the intimate space of a technology for the government of oneself? That the literature on governmentality gives pride of place to those rational, cognitive and intellectual dimensions of government begs the question as to the place of emotions in processes of subjectification. Does not the theory of govern- mentality, by ignoring the affective domain of feeling and embodiment, err on the side of a cognitivist view of subjectivity and conduct? Is there any emotional content to neoliberal subjectification? The case of happiness allows us to investigate this moment in which a set of calculative, instrumental and intellectual ordinances double themselves in the formation of an emotional disposition. This doubling presents a key transposition, a folding of governmental authority or a relay in the production of subjectivity. Where governmentality literature tends to emphasize the macro at the expense of the micro, or the plan over the practice, the government of the emotional state of happiness as the emotional homologue of a neoliberal rationality allows a critical opening on this point of transmutation, this hinge, between the government of others' happiness and the government of one's own, specifically by shifting from a rational to an emotional register. This double movement is described by Judith Butler:

> Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the
> subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion,

and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting. As a subject of power (where 'of' connotes both 'belonging to' and 'wielding'), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject's formation. They are made present in the acts of that formation and in the acts of the subject that follow. (Butler, 1997, p. 14)

The government of happiness, by allowing us to consider the production of subjectivity in both the moments of the 'belonging to' power (governmentality's rational moment) and the 'wielding' of power (governmentality's emotional homologue), opens a view onto this space wherein power's productivity doubles itself from the public to the intimate. A similar framing of this question is presented by Elaine Campbell in her discussion of what she terms 'emotionalities of rule' – those technologies through which the government of the self and the imperatives it imposes are experienced and manifested as distinct emotional states. For Campbell, emotionalities of rule describe 'discursive and material forms which propose and suppose particular ways of feeling about the world' (Campbell, 2010, p. 39). Moreover, Campbell brings her inquiry to the study of the emotional stakes invoked by the effort to make oneself over as an entrepreneurial, neoliberal subject, noting that: 'in order for neo-liberal subjects to think differently about the choices and decisions they can make, they may also need to learn to feel differently about them' (p. 40). An inquiry into the government of happiness illustrates how governmental rationalities transpose themselves onto the affective dispositions of subjects as analogous emotional enterprises centered on the cultivation and maximization of particular emotional potentials. A close textual analysis of a popular positive psychology publication brings these properties to light.

## The How of Happiness

In her best-selling work of popular psychology, *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, defines the project of happiness as one that comfortably crosses this rational/emotional divide, drawing its credential from the expertise of the scientific profession while also empowering readers as lay practitioners of their own programs of therapeutic self government (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Lyubomirsky is precise in this regard: she proposes that a full 40 per cent of our happiness is within our control. Using data from research on identical twins, she concludes that an additional 50 per cent is determined by our genetic inheritance, while the remaining 10 per cent is dictated by circumstance – like a recent divorce or a financial windfall. The detailed

program she lays out for the maximization of that 40 per cent includes a range of techniques variously centered on daily mental patterns, whose tendency toward negativity has to be intentionally and forcibly disrupted. These include a set of 'happiness boosters' for use in a variety of treatments, such as the keeping of a 'gratitude journal', or the performance of regular altruistic acts, such as 'visiting a nursing home, helping a friend's child with homework'.

Throughout the text, there is an effort to strike a delicate balance between the science of positive psychology and the accessibility of the self-help genre, both capitalizing on the authority of the psychological expert, while embracing the everyday emotional states of the lay reader. A review by Daniel Gilbert, of Harvard University and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, (Gilbert, 2006) another happiness self-help best seller, pulls no punches in marking the boundary between Lyubomirsky's credentialed advice manual and other popular works:

> Everyone has an opinion about happiness, and unfortunately, many of them write books. Finally we have a self-help book from a reputable scientist whose advice is based on the best experimental data. Charlatans, pundits, and New-Age gurus should be worried and the rest of us should be grateful. *The How of Happiness* is smart, fun, and interesting – unlike almost every other book on the same shelf, it also happens to be true. (Lyubomirsky, 2007, inside jacket)

Indeed, even the selection of titles for successive editions of *The How of Happiness* reflects the tension between the aura of scientific rationality and the appeal to the human intimacy: while the first edition in 2007 appeared with the subtitle 'a scientific approach to getting what you want', by the second edition two years later the word 'science' had been replaced with the word 'new'.

Lyubomirsky's theory is presented in the opening chapters of the book: she assumes that each of us has a certain 'baseline' for happiness, a genetic predisposition that cannot be modified. She calls this our set point. However, the possibility of advancing beyond our set point is conditional upon our activities, which typically entail preventing negative feelings from taking over, making us inactive and self-absorbed, and thus keeping us unhappy. Our progress above our set point is our happiness level, which can be determined by the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. On a scale of 6, the average happiness score is 4.3. Importantly, happiness and the various activities that produce it are described in terms of an implicit cost-benefit analysis, where the return on the time one puts in is repaid in quantities of happiness. Indeed, even the value of happiness itself is measured through such an exchange: in a chapter with the title 'Why Be Happy', Lyubomirsky

describes the 'fringe benefits' that come with happiness, such as an increase in social skills, energy, productivity at work, likeability by peers, resilience and the capacity to earn money. Yet the barriers to happiness are many, and their overcoming requires the happy practitioner to master a specific technology of emotional life.

Most of the problems that obscure the path to elevated happiness levels, as described earlier, come in the form of the reluctance to act on one's own, to assume full responsibility for oneself and one's life, or to settle into unreflective routines. This tendency is inevitable: the law of 'hedonic adaptation' dictates that the best of situations naturally loses its power to energize or produce happiness, and thus must be broken up through the implementation of the happiness program. Once we set aside our genetic predisposition and our circumstances, the 40 per cent remaining is determined specifically by this willingness to overcome hesitation, docility and the habits of life, and to act in the interest of our own satisfactions. Lyubomirsky writes:

> In a nutshell, the foundation of happiness can be found in how you behave, what you think, and what goals you set every day of your life. 'There is no happiness without action.' If feelings of passivity and futility overcome you whenever you face up to your happiness set point or to your circumstances, you must know that a genuine and abiding happiness is indeed within your reach, lying within the 40 per cent of the happiness pie chart that's yours to guide. (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 68)

Barriers to action come in many forms, among them the tendency to withdraw into one's own subjective interior. Negative thinking, or what Lyubomirsky calls 'rumination', presents distinct hazards, and must be specifically avoided. In 'Happiness Activity no. 3', readers are advised to 'avoid overthinking', as that activity that distracts us from spontaneous investment in life and immersion in the 'flow' of activities, and inevitably drags us down, tangles us up, mires us, and prevents happy activity. Her discussion of rumination is woven with references to a despicable dependence and passivity: being stuck, sinking into thoughts, burdened with pessimism, obsessively returning to the same thoughts without progress. The solutions to rumination are in distraction and immersion in activity, which can be achieved through a variety of techniques, such as the 'stop technique'. Lyubomirsky describes it: 'you think, say or even shout to yourself, "Stop!" or "No!" when you find yourself resuming overthinking. … Use your intellectual powers to think about something else – like your shopping list or what you will say when you call the plumber on the phone or the steps you need to take in planning your next vacation' (p. 120). Indeed, Lyubomirsky's warnings on habit come from her most fundamental understandings of happiness, and the erosion of happiness resulting from hedonic adaptation. Happiness levels increase most

measurably when we act opportunistically, discover new things and are stimulated by new experiences. Yet as this novelty wears off, we become habituated, we grow used to things and drift into negative thoughts. Indeed, the law of hedonic adaptation is used so widely as to eclipse all of those features of intersubjectivity that had been central to an earlier generation of social psychologists. Others in one's life, peers, spouses, family members and so on possess no deeper psychological significance than that of their opportunistic value for the strategic pursuit of personal satisfaction. The author describes the case of Markus, a man who reports high levels of happiness in his marriage, because he has applied a set of techniques to offset the natural tendency toward habit formation and adaptation that occurs as the routines of domestic life set in.

> Markus didn't want the effects of marriage to 'wear off'; he didn't want to adapt to the rewards of marriage and take it for granted. So he decided to dedicate himself to be the best husband he could be and not take his wife and their relationship for granted. He consciously remembers to say 'I love you', to bring her flowers, to initiate plans, trips, and hobbies, to take an interest in his wife's challenges, successes and feelings. (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 65)

What is striking in this passage is not just the distrust of a formed pattern of domestic co-existence (traditionally considered the well-spring of marital happiness), but the manner in which Markus's wife enters into the happiness equation, not as another person, an emotional interlocutor, friend or object of desire or aggressions, but as an instrument for the maximization of Markus's emotional happiness. Markus is free to maximize this quality in his own life. While a century of marriage therapy and relationship counseling had sought to resolve domestic tensions by mediating the interpersonal space of the conjugal bond (a program that extends the specific mandate of social government to foster collective membership and social dependencies), the spouse appears here as a pure environmental resource in the enterprise of the happiness entrepreneur. The tendency to form habits of mutuality, under the guidance of a psychological expert, or to arrive at a state of mutual understanding through shared introspection and self-discovery, have all fallen by the wayside. These are now the burdens that have the effect of reducing our freedom to make active investments in our own happiness.

The task of positive psychology, then, must be measured against those of the older therapeutic conventions it seeks to replace. While what we might call 'negative' psychology sought to foster adaptation and adjustment to social conditions through enhanced self-understanding, reciprocity and empathy, positive psychology is remarkably devoid – even contemptuous of – the therapeutic program as one steered toward adjustment, conformity

and emotional reciprocity. It is as dubious of the activity of introspection valorized in psycho-dynamic approaches, as it is of the priority of interpersonal relations celebrated in transactional analysis. These conventions represent the over-extension of a technology of government that governs too much, saddling the individual with a social objective, whose influence diminishes the prospects for freedom and self responsibility. They are the hallmarks of an old technology of the psychological apparatus, whose aim was to foster reciprocity, adjustment, mutual understanding, collective well being and social consensus through the mechanism of supervised introspection – the socializing objectives of social government and the welfare state, which shaped the program of social psychology for much of the twentieth century. Against this tendency, happiness seeks to govern less. Happiness is a task, a regimen, a daily undertaking in which the individual produces positive emotional states just as a fitness guru might shape a desired muscle group. To govern oneself through the maximization of one's potential for happiness is to govern oneself as a subject of neoliberal enterprise: agency, autonomy, freedom from dependence and external constraint, and the cognitive wherewithal necessary for the pursuit of self-interest are metonymically aligned with the content of happiness itself. Such is the work of the government of happiness.

## About the Author

Sam Binkley is Associate Professor of Sociology at Emerson College. His research focuses on the formation of subjectivity in the context of contemporary social life. Employing theoretical tools derived from the works of Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu and others, he has investigated formations of selfhood in a variety of sites, from the counterculture lifestyle movements of the 1960s and 1970s, to Cuban socialism, to contemporary anti-consumerist movements. He has also published theoretical studies on such themes as reflexive subjectivity, consumerism, temporality, governmentality, habitus and neo-liberalism. His recent book, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Duke University Press, 2007) examines the role of lifestyle print culture in the shaping of personal identity. He is co-editor (with Jorge Capetillo) of *A Foucault for the 21st Century* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), and his articles have appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Cultural Studies*, *Foucault Studies*, *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*, *Time & Society*, *The European Journal of Cultural Studies* and the *Journal for Cultural Research*. In addition to serving as co-editor of *Foucault Studies*, he is currently working on a new book project on happiness, life coaching and positive psychology, as a case of neo-liberal governmentality.

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