

Film 9, Happy - Are we destroying the planet in a misguided pursuit of happiness? (2024)

Happy is not an environmental film. Why, then, are we watching it?

Lately I have been thinking about what may well be the greatest irony of the human race. If we do not survive the climate crisis, it will be a sad epitaph for our species.

From even before Plato, thinkers in the West have long pondered what constitutes the “good life.” In the United States, we have been preoccupied with this question ever since we declared ourselves an independent country and made the “pursuit of happiness” one of three “unalienable rights” in our Declaration of Independence.

What now constitutes the “good life” in the U.S.? In other words, how are we pursuing happiness? The American Dream now seems to center on wanting more, wanting bigger, and wanting better. More stuff, bigger houses, better cars, etc.

The problem is that this has not at all made us happy. In fact, in recent decades, Americans have become less and less happy. While this would be a sad irony in itself, the great tragedy is that many of these pursuits are destroying our planet. The US put a quarter of all greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. Indeed, at the same time that Americans have been becoming less happy, we have been pumping more greenhouse gasses into our planet’s atmosphere.

What is in many ways even worse is that we are now exporting this environmentally disastrous aspect of the “American way of life” to the rest of the planet. It would be one thing if we were releasing greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere for more noble reasons, such as to ensure that everyone on the planet was well nourished and had enough to eat, but this is all largely unnecessary. Do we each really need sixty or more items of new clothing every year?

In short, we have frenetically and futilely been pursuing happiness at the cost of the planet. As noted above, the great irony is that, as greenhouse gas emissions soared as a result of our pursuit of happiness, our happiness has actually declined.

So, here is my question: Are we indeed destroying our planet in a profoundly misguided pursuit of happiness?

In order to wrestle with this question, let's look at happiness compared to greenhouse gas emissions for a number of pretty happy countries.

First, it's true: after many decades of studying depression and unhappiness, a range of scholars, from psychologists to sociologists, have recently turned their attention to happiness, as has the United Nations. The United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, using Gallup Polling data, released the World Happiness Report in 2019.

The report revealed that the United States ranked #19 worldwide in terms of happiness ([source](#)). With respect to the climate crisis, we emit about 16 metric tons of CO₂ per person ([source](#)), which gives us the dubious distinction of being one of the world leaders when it comes to GHG emissions.

Alternately, the five countries with the happiest people on the planet (Finland, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Netherlands) all have individual emissions that are on average about half of the United States, in spite of the fact that they are all in distinctly northern climates and hence use quite a bit of energy just for heating.

In fact, a whopping 81% of Finland's greenhouse gas emissions comes from the energy sector ([source](#)), which is hardly surprising, as the capital of Finland, Helsinki, is further north than the capital of Alaska, which is Juneau. In general, living in a cold climate demands far more energy than living in a warmer one, even if air conditioners are widely used in the future. One study found that living in Minneapolis demanded three-and-a-half times more energy than living in Miami ([source](#)).

Living in places that are even further north consumes even more energy. Energy-related carbon dioxide emissions for the average Alaskan are twice as large as the average person in the US. ([source](#)).

Moving from Finland to the sixth most happy country in the world, Switzerland, average per capita greenhouse gas emissions there are one third of the United States in spite of the fact that it too is not a very warm country (two thirds of Switzerland is in the Alps mountain range).

Number seven on the list of happy countries is Sweden, also a pretty cold place (Sweden's capital, Stockholm, is also further north than Juneau, Alaska). Nonetheless, their per capita greenhouse emissions are approximately one fourth of the United States.

Let's pause for a moment on this: the seven countries on the planet with the happiest people, in spite of demanding significantly greater energy use because of their northern locales, have climate footprints that are one half, one third, or one fourth ours.

The climate footprints of happy people can be even smaller if they live in warmer climates. Costa Rica, which ranks number 12 in terms of worldwide happiness (hence Costa Ricans are significantly happier than Americans at number 19) has greenhouse gas emissions that are about one seventh of the United States. That's right, the average American contributes as much to the climate crisis as seven pretty happy people in Costa Rica.

The example of Costa Rica reveals an interesting element here, as the average American is thirteen times wealthier than the average person in Costa Rica (as measured by mean wealth per adult, [source](#)). As our relative climate footprints reveal, we Americans are presumably using quite a bit of this wealth in ways that are damaging the planet.

However, with respect to income, let's face facts: it is difficult to be happy if you are poor. If you are trying to raise a family in the US on an annual income of, say, \$40,000, a range of hardships would certainly threaten your happiness. However, studies have found that beyond a certain point, more money does not bring greater happiness. That number may be lower than you would imagine, as these studies revealed that it is around \$75,000 in annual income for an individual ([source](#)). While this is more than the annual median personal income in the US, it is certainly not Kardashian wealth.

Although [a recent study](#) has contested this \$75,000 number, this group also concluded that people who "equate money with happiness are generally less happy people... The main takeaway we had from his data was that income is only a modest determinant of happiness."

Moreover, no one (to my knowledge) has attempted to isolate and remove the influence of the overwhelming marketing bombarding us, which tells us daily (or hourly, or sometimes even by the minute when we are online) that we need to buy a range of products to be happy.

Consider the example of Costa Rica, as it reveals, simply put, that you don't need a lot of money to be happy. Nor does a greater happiness necessarily come with, comparatively, a relatively high climate footprint.

Now, let's return to those very happy but very cold Scandinavian countries. For the most part, their economies and cultures are built on something called the "Nordic model." While these are, of course, democratic countries, they also very much embrace things like collective bargaining and strong unions. Hence, they are sometimes called "democratic socialist" countries.

Bernie Sanders nicely explains what these countries offer: "So long as we know what democratic socialism is. If we know that in countries, in Scandinavia, like Denmark, Norway, Sweden — they are very democratic countries, obviously, the voter turnout is a lot higher than it is in the United States. In those countries, health care is the right of all people. And in those countries, college education, graduate school is free. In those countries, retirement benefits, child care are stronger than in the United States of America, and in those countries, by and large, government works for ordinary people in the middle class, rather than, as is the case right now in our country (the US.), for the billionaire class." ([source](#))

Even though we might think that happiness is a deeply personal matter, governments have a major role to play in facilitating our "pursuit of happiness." When they are doing their job responsibly, caring for the wellbeing of their citizens rather than large corporate sponsors, we are likely to be much happier.

But, specifically, how are people in these Scandinavian countries happier and how does this relate to the climate crisis?

Let's look at Sweden. Recall that the average Swede is considerably happier than the average American even though their climate footprints are one fourth of ours.

The average person in Sweden, who makes almost as much money as the average person in the US, works five days a week, six hours a day. That's right, [the average work week is 30 hours in Sweden](#). Only a very tiny percentage of people (1%) work more than 50 hours per week. By contrast, 40% of Americans work more than 50 hours per week; half of them work more than 60 hours per week ([source](#)). Hence, one in five Americans literally works twice as many hours per week as the average Swede.

Everyone in Sweden receives 25 paid vacation days per year, and larger companies typically offer even more. All parents receive 480 days of paid paternity leave to split between them ([source](#)). As there are 235 working days per year (52 weeks times 5 days minus 25 vacation days), that's one year of paternity leave – per parent.

There are, of course, differences between Sweden and the U.S that impact their climate footprints. For example, Sweden currently relies more on nuclear energy than the US.

However, over a third of their electricity comes from hydroelectric sources – a whopping three times more than the US. ([source](#)). In terms of consumption rather than production, we have twice as many cars per person as they do. Our houses are, on average, roughly twice as large than theirs.

This is not to say that life in Sweden is perfect. There are problems there, like everywhere else.

But just look at the relative climate impact between Sweden and the US. Everything else being equal, the average Swede has a carbon footprint that's a quarter of the average Americans. But everything is not equal, as it is a much colder climate. Americans living in a comparable climate (Alaska) are emitting twice as much carbon dioxide as our nation's average. Hence, adjusted for their colder climate, the average Swede may well be emitting something like one eighth of the average American's greenhouse gas emissions.

Currently, the average person in Sweden is responsible for 4.54 metric tons of CO₂ per year. If, for reasons of argument, we adjusted that for the average American climate, it would then get cut in half, to around 2.25 metric tons of CO₂ for an American – which would be right around where we need to be to meet the goals of the Paris Accord signed at COP 21.

Of course, these are back-of-napkin calculations, but people in wealthy countries can - and do! - not only get by, but live quite well with relatively small climate footprints.

In terms of our current discussion, they can also live happier lives than most Americans.

We are often told that adapting to climate change will mean that we have to live drab of deprivation and require us to do without quite a bit.

However, if we make this sort of changes that we have been looking at in this course, might we come out the other end, decades from now, happier?

I will leave you with this question as we move to the class discussion.

Class discussion of Happy

Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote a student's observation, followed by my thoughts.

First, let's start with a quote from actor Jim Carrey:

I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.

The difficulty is that many people we will simply not hear Carrey's message, as the following comment perceptively notes:

[W]hile the message of the film has good intentions, I would find it difficult to convince those who are in deep struggle or poverty that money won't give happiness. Security is an amazing feeling, and the United States, it is apparently not a right for everyone to be housed or to a basic income.

The American Dream of unbridled consumption (and, correspondingly, unbridled greenhouse gas emissions) is so ubiquitous, thanks to many decades of tireless work by marketers on the behalf of seemingly countless corporations, that it looms large for a large swath of Americans - perhaps especially for people in economically disadvantaged situations.

Simply put, we believe that money buys happiness (through, for example, the acquisition of things) because we have endlessly been preached that mantra by marketers. And, of course, scores of influencers confirm it to be true.

But there is another issue here, which this comment aptly introduces. Money promises to create a sense of security for people who feel precariously perched economically. Faced with the prospect of homelessness, which can quickly become a reality for even middle-income Americans (see the movie *Nomadland* for some dramatic insight into how this

could come about), it should come as no surprise that security, if not luxury, is an ideal for many Americans.

However, as this comment notes, this is in part because we live in a country where it is not, for example, as this person notes, “a right for everyone to be housed.” Nor, I would add, a right to healthcare, an education, and a range of additional services and safety nets.

Hence, as this person aptly notes, “[s]ecurity is an amazing[ly] comforting] feeling” when you live in a system that does not provide it. In other words, we each individually aggregate wealth because we do not have adequate safety nets to provide for us if something goes wrong, such as if we have some sort of catastrophic illness, because we do not have health insurance.

The difficulty, of course, is that this can be seen as a systemic failure, as we wouldn't need this type of security if we had a system that provided for the well-being of everyone, including during examples like this.

One of my favorite quotes from the film is “...with happiness, the more you have, the more everyone has.” I think the statement is a stark contrast with our concept of money and material wealth. I also believe that this statement symbolizes humans’ motivation for cooperation, rather than the motivation for competition between one another.

This comment gets straight to one of the central issues here:

The acquisition of material wealth is, as it plays out in the US, at root a competition – a fierce competition. We admire and celebrate the Kardashians and people like Elon Musk (currently the richest person on the planet). And, of course, we all wish that we could be winners like them.

Conversely, the people that lose in this competition, lose big. People without houses being an obvious example. Not only will your life likely be miserable if you are unhoused in the US, you will, compared to the average American, likely die nearly 20 years earlier if you are a man and almost 30 years earlier if you are a woman.

Because the stakes are so high - let's face it, our lives are at stake - we are encouraged to go all in on the competition. After all, losing potentially means losing everything, even our lives.

Many people will argue that this competition is simply natural, that this is human nature at work. Dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest, and all that.

However, a range of researchers, such as Dacher Keltner, the Director of the Social Interaction Lab at UC Berkeley and the author of the book *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, argue that positive emotions and cooperation are hardwired into human beings. It is simple enough: throughout human history, across a range of different cultures, people have cared for one another.

In short, cooperation, compassion, and kindness are cornerstones of our species. This is how we have survived and succeeded, as we are, at root, a social animal. In other words, we have succeeded as a species because (and all stand to benefit individually when) we cooperate with each other, rather than compete.

Unfortunately, an all-out consumer society, like ours, flourishes because of competition. We want to make a display of the fact that we have more and better things than everyone else. From our point of view, we want the world to know that we have competed and won.

From the point of view of marketers, it matters little who wins and who loses. What matters to them is that we all consume far more than we need in order to stay in the competition. Expressed another way, not only are they in the business of making things and providing services, they are in the business of keeping the competition alive.

After all, if didn't we buy what they were selling - and, more to the point, buy into the idea that we actually need it - there would be little or no competition.

So, as odd as it may sound, compassion and cooperation will be essential in mitigating the climate crisis in so far as we need to dramatically reduce this odd and disastrous competition of seeing who can cause more greenhouse gasses to be emitted. In the bargain, as Dacher Keltner and others have argued, we stand to become much happier individuals and as a species.

The following comment further argues for the importance of cooperation and teamwork:

I could not help but make connections to the Climate Crisis while watching this film. This film highlights the higher levels of happiness humans can achieve when working as a community or team. The Climate Crisis is going to take an unprecedented amount of teamwork to be addressed effectively. Through breaking down our fetishized relationship with the individual we can work to attain higher levels of cohesiveness in society that will work in our benefit when addressing the climate crisis. This climate aware community could not only be a strong force of climate action, but also serve to uplift the happiness in each and every person. The film provides the example of Okinawa, Japan and the people's ability to work as a cohesive unit. Although not directed at the climate, this unification of peoples that are interested in the betterment of things other than their own personal wealth, can be a powerful framework to follow in the years to come.

In the documentary *Happy*, Okinawa serves as a shining example of, as this person notes, "people's ability to work as a cohesive unit."

Although the comparison of Okinawa with Japan breaks down pretty quickly (and is arguably inaccurate and unfair), the filmmakers seem to clearly want to offer up Okinawa an alternative to a consumerist society where people work long hours in the pursuit of

happiness , yet are not at all happy. In this sense, Japan serves as a stand-in for the US and the American Dream that it is selling to the world.

In any event, the example of Okinawa suggests, as this person aptly notes, that the "unification of peoples that are interested in the betterment of things other than their own personal wealth, can be a powerful framework to follow in the years to come."

In other words, while we often hear that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, where only the fittest survive, Okinawa (and plenty of additional cultures across the planet) makes clear that this is not the only way of being in the world. In response to the previous comment, we noted that a range of theorists, such as the aforementioned Dacher Keltner at UC Berkeley, suggest that we will have happier lives if we live in a culture built on cooperation rather than competition, Okinawa provides a real-life example of how this can work. If the film is to be believed, apparently it works quite well.

The following comment continues with the theme of cooperation:

The part of the documentary that stood out the most to me was the co-housing opportunities in Denmark. It is such a counter-cultural lifestyle when considered in our rather greedy American context, yet I found it to be a very attractive idea. It made sense in every way I could think of. It is more practical, as it gives you more time (since chores and cooking are shared responsibilities). It provides community to watch over your children and be extra helping hands. It also appears to be more fun. It sort of combines the best part of college, where you can be living in close proximity to many friends while still having your own space, with the best part of adulthood, growing a community with friends and raising a family. I found myself wishing I grew up in Denmark, where there is additionally free healthcare and public education through college. People in Denmark might not have their own room in a giant house, or their own car, but they seem to be just as happy as us Americans, and most-likely even happier. There is a lot to be learned from Denmark. I believe that if they can live fulfilling and more sustainable lives, so can we.

So, regarding the previous two comments, how could we - in practical, real-life terms - foster less competition and greater cooperation between human beings look like? Yes, the example of Okinawa suggests that there are cultures that have cooperation as one of their cornerstones. But how do you engineer something like this in a wealthy country like the United States?

As this person argues, the example of co-housing in Denmark from the documentary *Happy* provides a compelling answer. In co-housing communities, people (who are not related) live together for both their own personal good, as well as for the good of everyone else living there. Indeed, personal health and happiness is intimately related to the health of the community.

Such a community can, as this comment notes, combine "the best part of college, where you can be living in close proximity to many friends while still having your own space, with the best part of adulthood, growing a community with friends and raising a family."

Co-housing communities are, arguably, considerably better than college, as they carefully vet people and families before they join the community.

A few years ago, my partner, daughter, and I visited and shared in a communal dinner in a cohousing community here in California (which is, in fact, just 80 miles north of Santa Barbara). It was a very pleasant experience, though it was very clear that the community as a whole was interested in getting to know anyone potentially moving into the community, to make sure that it was a good fit for everyone involved.

This film was purposefully made, and made well. It's deep and scientific approach to happiness intrigued me and made me analyze myself. I was curious to see what others had to say about this article, and as I was reading the comments, I saw a lot of the same thoughts as mine. This film made me think, and ultimately I decided that a lot of the things in my life that I thought made me "happy" are just not doing it. Of course I got the message that materialism doesn't make me happy, but that really wasn't a big takeaway for me. I began to realize during this film that happiness needs to come from the mundane. It doesn't need to come from Mexico trips, or Disneyworld, or going to a party, it should come from the things I do everyday. It was so amazing to see everyone's perspective on this. The analysis of happiness is always an important facet of life. I really enjoyed this connection to the course, I love how it somehow fits right into the material, even though it is not outwardly tied to the climate crisis. This is such an important moment in all of our lives, we have so much time in life to make change, and this is the time where we get to figure out what makes us happy. Like the woman who was run over by a truck, motivation is key. Everyone has something that can motivate them to push through and forge a better life, and hopefully I, and we all, can find that soon.

First, this comment wonderfully underscores the importance of reading what other people in our class have to say about the films and readings.

In particular, this person notes that "Of course, I got the message that materialism doesn't make me happy, but that really wasn't a big takeaway for me. I began to realize during this film that happiness needs to come from the mundane... It was so amazing to see everyone's perspective on this."

As the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh noted, "The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it." In other words, we are always striving after what we think will make us happy, whether it is some sort of object, like a new phone or car, or some sort of trip or experience. For example, as this person notes, a trip to Mexico or Disney World, or going to a party.

This is an important observation, as we are often told, sometimes by minimalists, that we should stop pursuing material objects and instead pursue experiences. However, as this person notes, happiness can be found even in the "mundane."

Finally, this person, quite interestingly, speaks directly to the rest of the class – more to the point, speaks to your generation - noting that, "[t]his is such an important moment in

all of our lives, we have so much time in life to make change, and this is the time where we get to figure out what makes us happy."

Simply put, as the great majority of the people in our class are around 20 years old, give or take a couple years, you should see this, as this person notes, as a decisive moment in life, as this is when you decide just how you were going to live. This impacts you personally, as you, to use this person's apt phrase, "get to figure out what makes us happy." But you also get to figure out how to live in an environmental way and climate sustainable way, as well as a manner that is generous and compassionate.

I'm going to end on that, as it is such an interesting observation.