An Interview with Andrew Oswald
University of Warwick and IZA (Institute for the Study of Labour)

Interview by
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1. What got you interested in wellbeing research?

In the early 90s one of the things that attracted me was the thought that we could use wellbeing data to try to answer the question of whether unemployment was voluntary or involuntary. That's one thing that drew me in. And, second, just generally, I realised that it was possible to conduct happiness surveys and that just seemed to me a very interesting thing to do. And I remember the first time an equation came out where happiness was increasing in income and I thought "Hmm, we're definitely onto something here".

2. What do you take "wellbeing" to mean?

I'm quite happy to listen to people when they answer survey questions, so I don't want to force my idea of wellbeing on them. I would say, a feeling of joy and also broader contentment with your life. But in my work I've come to the conclusion that, at least in large samples, it doesn't much matter whether we ask people "life satisfaction", "mental health", "happiness right now" and so on. The question is not all that important, though I remain open to the possibility that I might change my mind with future data sources.

3. Why is wellbeing research important?

It seems to me that if you're a social scientist, an economist say, then this is the most important thing there is. What could be more important than understanding human wellbeing? Unless you have very powerful views about animal ethics, unless you're in that special category (and I know some people are), human wellbeing is the most important topic in social science.

4. What is the most important wellbeing-related finding to date?

It's not easy to say what the most important wellbeing finding is. I do think that age "U shape" is an extremely intriguing result and might tell us something very profound about human beings. Other ones that come to my mind are the importance of relationships (like marriage), the way that humans bounce back from things (like bereavement), and the fact that wellbeing is increasing in income is, it seems to me, a very important, fundamental finding.

5. What is the most important application of wellbeing research to our lives?

Wellbeing applications haven't come through terribly strongly, yet. This is, by some measures, a relatively new branch of social science. And I think that the big applications will be about valuing green factors, environmental factors, in our lives. I think that the economics of

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happiness methods are going to revolutionise our attitudes to the green movement. They'll also be used in the courts for valuing subtle things, such as emotions from important life events. And there will be a replacement of GDP by a wellbeing index, towards the end of my life or even, perhaps, earlier.

6. What are you working on right now?

Right now I'm working on the happiness of non-human primates, amazingly enough. I never expected to do that. I'm trying to understand—using randomised methods—how much government policy can raise the happiness of a country's citizens. Not an easy thing to do for a country.

7. What do you think the next big thing in wellbeing research will be?

I think the next big thing is likely to be linking up with the hard sciences. And exactly how that will be done is hard to say. It could be a link with genes, it could be a link with human biology, it could even be a link with the study of animals—non-human animals and humans. But, by its nature, predicting the next big thing is awfully hard.

8. What are the main benefits of interdisciplinary research on wellbeing?

I would turn the question around I suppose, or I tend to when people ask me this type of question. Wellbeing is an incredibly interesting, important subject and different disciplines are going to look at wellbeing and think about it from different angles. Presumably each angle has part of the truth, so by the nature of this subject you can't say that it's *for* psychologists, it's *for* economists, it's *for* medical researchers, or it's *for* physiologists. It's not *for* anybody. It's just wellbeing has these multiple aspects and that's why it's such a good topic for a blending of disciplines.

9. What would the ideal census question on wellbeing be and why?

I don't think it makes too much difference in large samples, though I remain open to the possibility that I'll have to revise my view. I am quite content at the moment with a question like, "How happy do you feel right now?" That would be fine. In the longer run I believe those kinds of answers will be blended with physiological or brain science measures of the happiness of individuals.

10. Is there anything else you would like to comment on?

I think we will go over more and more to the construction of randomised experiments in some sort of longitudinal data setting with scientific measures, hard science measures, of what goes on inside humans that's out of their control. That is, truly objective data blended with subjective data.

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