

PodMag April 2016

The PodMag

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, the audio news magazine from Social Sciences at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and in this April edition we're going to focus on books. There are four in particular that we're going to look at Happiness Explained, Secrets of Enduring Love, Diplomacy and Reform in Iran and the latest in the series of Poverty in Scotland.

First I'm speaking to Paul Anand from the OU's International Development priority research area. He's just published a book on happiness.

Hi Paul. Now on 20th March it was World Happiness Day and this coincided perfectly with the launch of your new book Happiness Explained. So could you tell us what the book's about?

Paul Anand:

Absolutely. So Happiness Explained is about research that we've been doing here at the Open University or led by the university over the past 15 years in to human flourishing, what it is, how it's determined and in some cases some of the consequences. It's also an overview of a lot of literature in a range of disciplines from economics through psychology to philosophy and even politics that looks at quality of life, wellbeing, happiness and so on right across the life course.

So it covers quite a lot of ground in a fairly short space of time. That's it in a nutshell.

Karen Foley:

OK, so this idea of combining all of these things and looking at human flourishing and how, I guess, valuable that is it's not a new concept. But you're trying to do something slightly different with it aren't you?

Paul Anand:

Yes. The approach we've taken has been developed by a person called Amartya Sen who obtained a Nobel Prize in economics round about 1999 with a bit of help from a woman called Martha Nussbaum who's a political philosopher based in Chicago.

And they developed this kind of really interesting framework that mixes ideas from economic theory with analytical philosophy. And were very interested to see if the approach could be operational, I think in practice, whether it was workable or not. And so that's the thing that we've really focused on over the past decade or so, as I say. In terms of looking to see whether we can develop datasets that match all the conceptual

elements and frameworks of the approach. And so that's what we've tried to do. And that's the sort of novel element I suppose.

And this means that we've got data on things like the kind of activities that people get involved in. The states they want to be in. The experiences they have. How satisfied they are ranging from how satisfied they are with life through to whether they were anxious yesterday or not. But also including other things that typically in the past people have felt were rather less measureable. So, for example, the opportunities and constraints that people face in their lives and how those are distributed within society.

So we've got quite a lot of new data. It's new in a variety of ways. It's new that it's collected all together in one place for individuals. And we've also got data on the kind of resources that people have and their ability to convert those resources in to the things they value. So I guess that's the kind of the new picture that we're trying to develop. A sort of fairly rounded overall assessment of what matters to people and how they achieve it.

Karen Foley:

And what did you find then? Were there any interesting insights? Because of course this idea about how we measure happiness changes depending on our context and our time period and I guess what matters fundamentally to people as individuals and their values. What's shifting? Are there any insights that you've had further to the knowledge base out there that's already been looking at some of these factors?

Paul Anand:

One of the things that was striking actually was there are a few principles that occur right throughout the life course. So, for example, we talk about the face principle. So this is fairness, autonomy, community and engagement and all of those things seem to be really important to people throughout their life course. Although the relative balance and what that actually means in practice changes quite dramatically. Nonetheless these things they matter for bringing up two year olds and they matter for people when they're retired and not working.

So I think the kind of continuity at the same time as there's change. That's a kind of mixed message if you like but I think that's one of the things that we've found quite interesting about this sort of work.

Karen Foley:

And finally can I ask you on the subject of happiness what is one thing that makes you really happy?

Paul Anand:

Well I suppose it depends on what you mean by happy. If what you mean is, you know, what puts me in a pleasant mood its things like having an interesting conversation with

somebody, going out to a restaurant, seeing an interesting show or movie? There's a variety of things like that. But if you mean, you know, what's fulfilling, what sustains me through the long term then I suppose its things like trying to achieve something that's quite difficult or seeing your children develop new kinds of skills and competencies. Or doing something that other people find helpful.

So it depends on what you mean.

Karen Foley:

I can see why you've had to write a book about this because happiness explained seems quite a lot more complex than I'd originally thought. Paul Anand, thank you very much.

In our next interview I asked Meg-John Barker about *Secrets of Enduring Love* the book they've written with Jacquie Gabb and why it's a good read for anyone interested in successful long term relationships. And this is what they told me.

Meg-John Barker:

The *Secrets of Enduring Love* is a bit different to most of the relationship self-help books that are out there because it's based on a big research study. This was the Enduring Love Study that Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink carried out at the Open University which you can read about on the Enduring Love Open University websites. And they surveyed a lot of people about their experiences of long term relationships. And they also did in-depth interviews as well with a lot of partners talking about their experiences in more detail.

And so we've drawn on that research throughout this book. So while it's a self-help book and aimed at a general audience it's also got a lot of detail. And it's kind of brought to life by the stories of the people that they interviewed and also by the stats that they found.

And we've also woven other relationship research throughout the book like the 36 Questions Study about intimacy and also a lot of relationship therapy expertise as well through the book. So it's really drawn on the evidence that we have about what makes relationships work long term.

And the main finding really of the study was that different things work for different people in relationships. So there's no one size fits all solution even though a lot of self-help books will try and give you a kind of quick fix, one size fits all idea about what helps in relationships.

So really we're all about helping the reader to find out what works for them. We've got a number of activities based on the Enduring Love Study. And we've also got details about what works for the different participants from the study. So there's examples that the reader can read about and think, oh well that might work for me or it might not.

The themes in the book are every day kindness and gratitude which was really important and that comes out in most of the research studies on relationships.

We've also covered a lot about different living situations because people are living in really different kinds of set ups these days than perhaps in the past. We've got a lot about communication and also about managing conflicts. We've got a chapter on sex and physical intimacy and that chapter really talks about the main finding that sex really wasn't that important for a lot of people in long term relationships. But other kinds of physical intimacy seemed to be more so.

And then the final chapter is on telling our own relationship stories and how we can go about doing that.

There's lots more about it on the Enduring Love website on the Open University so I hope you enjoy finding out more.

Thanks very much.

Karen Foley:

Meg-John Barker thank you very much.

We'll now move from self-help to international relations and I'm talking next to Edward Wastnidge.

Hi Eddie, you've also had a book published but this one is about Diplomacy and Reform in Iran. Can you tell us what it's all about?

Edward Wastnidge:

Hi Karen, yes. Well this book is as the title suggests about Iran but primarily it's about the foreign policy of Iran. But there's an important caveat to add here because the person who I'm writing about is a former president called Mohammed Khatami, and he was what was known as a Reformist President.

So he was President of Iran from 1997 to 2005. He's had two terms. And he was an important figure because his election in 1997 represented a real change in Iran in politics. So he was seen as a Reformist figure. Now that means that basically he had some ideas about opening up civil society in Iran, you know, increasing rights for women, increasing kind of democratic participation. And also importantly opening Iran up to the world more because up until that point, you know, it had a very patchy international reputation. And it's a reputation that it's still obviously looking to improve on.

So he had an important idea of dialogue among civilisations. Now this was an idea that saw Iran as a great civilisation. He really tried to pull these different strands on Iranian

identity together. It's kind of pre-Islamic aspects and of its ancient empires that were kind of contemporaneous with Rome and Ancient Greece. And also its latest position in the Islamic world as well.

So what I'm interested in looking at and exploring in the book is how this idea was translated to the world and how it has actually found an application in its foreign policy. Because I'm really interested in how ideas translate in to foreign policy outcomes.

So I start off by giving some background to Khatami and how Iranian foreign policy is formed. And then we look at the Reform Movement in Iran because he's synonymous with that. And we look at how the domestic aspects of Iranian politics are important and how they then informed Iran's foreign policy subsequently.

From that I look at how this idea of dialogue among civilisation are used in foreign relations, I look at how it's applied with other countries. And then I look at how it was applied in international organisations, how it was used at the United Nations for example and the Organisation of Islamic Conference. And really the question I'm looking to see is, is this idea purely a philosophical ideal that has its roots in the academic world or is it a foreign policy tool? I kind of come up with the conclusion that it's a bit of both really.

Karen Foley:

It sounds absolutely fascinating. I mean it's obviously a niche book so it's going to appeal to, you know, students and people who are specifically interested in contemporary Iran. And I guess all the complexities of foreign policy also. But this type of research is quite different because you're doing something that is obviously very timely and temporal.

And I wonder if you could just tell us a little bit about, you know, what challenges that kind of research and scholarship presents?

Edward Wastnidge:

There's a few things. One of the difficult practical issues is getting access to sources in Iran itself. I'm very fortunate when I was researching this book that I actually lived for a year in Iran and I learnt Persian so I was able to access Iranian sources in the Persian language which is helpful. But that's not something that's available to everyone. But I think that's a very important thing because you have so many Western analyses of Iranian foreign policy that's written by scholars in the West and it's just US or British interpretation. Whereas I was really interested to go and get the Iranian perspectives on this kind of issue as well. To use original sources and to interview key political figures out there as well.

But that was challenging itself, there's all sorts of visa issues trying to get out to Iran. But it was time well spent and it's an experience I'll remember all my life. So challenging in a way but also really wonderful.

Karen Foley:

Fantastic, brilliant. And finally I just wanted to ask you very briefly, what is something that's made you happy in that whole process?

Edward Wastnidge:

I think it's just seeing your research come to fruition. It's very easy when you're doing your academic research to be in your own little bubble. But then when you get acknowledgement that actually it is a good bit of research, then that's really gratifying. Whether the reviewers will be so kind I don't know, but that's been a really good part of it and I've had good support to get it done.

Karen Foley:

Ah so that sense of achievement must just feel fabulous.

Edward Wastnidge:

Yeah it is. It's my first book as well, so it's a big step for me as well, hopefully the start of many.

Karen Foley:

Thank you very much Eddie.

And the next book we consider is slightly different. Gerry Mooney is based in the Nation Office of Scotland and his interest in politics is at a regional level. The book I'm talking to him about has a very different purpose with an aim to impact on local politics.

Hi Gerry.

Gerry Mooney:

Hi Karen.

Karen Foley:

Now you've just launched another book in the Poverty in Scotland series and you've been involved in both editing and authoring this. It's Poverty in Scotland 2016 – Tools for Transformation. Can you tell us what the book is about?

Gerry Mooney:

The book is concerned to pay more attention on two issues of poverty and equality disadvantage within Scotland. Tomorrow is the start of the campaigning for the May 2016 Scottish Elections, and amongst all the issues that we discuss there we hope that poverty and issues related to poverty, will be high on the agenda. So the book is produced to try and influence the political debate, and also that will feed through to policy for the new Parliament.

Karen Foley:

For the last edition of the book in March 2014, you had an audience of over 50 people to hear the contributions from Nicola Sturgeon who was then the Deputy First Prime Minister. How are you hoping that this book will impact in politics?

Gerry Mooney:

Well there's a lot of different aspects to that. I mean I think if you look at today's event here in the Edinburgh OU office, we had again 55 people there including MSP's and politicians representing each major political parties in Scotland. And we hope that they will use the book to encourage people to think about debates and issues around poverty that relate to poverty in a Scottish context.

So for us, it's about shaping an informed political debate in Scotland that will recognise that much of the debate about poverty takes place outside Scotland but is relevant to Scotland, because the UK government, its policy still impacts in Scotland as much as they do elsewhere.

So this is a book about trying to shape, redirect discussions on poverty that we would hope is much more progressive.

Karen Foley:

Great, thank you. I'd mentioned earlier that you are in one of the university's National Offices. Can you tell us a bit about some of the priorities in terms of Scottish higher education at the moment?

Gerry Mooney:

Yes I'm pleased to do that. And clearly one of the advantages we have as an open university is we work across the four countries of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and obviously overseas as well. And I think that gives us a very good position in terms of understanding some of the major shifts that are taking place in these islands.

Clearly people listening to this will be aware that Scotland had an Independence Referendum. That issue has not gone away. Clearly there was more divergence taking place between Scotland and other parts of the UK and that's reflected both in the political debates and in the policy landscape.

So Scotland is increasingly a different place from other areas of which the OU operates. And, you know, for us as a university it's how we work across the four countries of the UK and Ireland, how we meet the needs of particular student populations in those different countries. Now clearly what we also have to do as a university is ensure you're working to meet the aspirations and goals of the Scottish government because it's the Scottish government that pays the Open University to run an operation in Scotland. And clearly expect us to help shape the educational future of Scotland as a whole. And that's reflected in wider participation issues. Reflected in the fees and of course I know this

will annoy students elsewhere in the UK but OU students in Scotland do not pay anything like the level of fees that are, you know, being paid in England. And indeed a huge percentage of our students don't pay any fees at all because they're entitled to financial support from the Scottish government.

So the policymaking and wider political contexts within which we operate is increasingly distinctive and divergent from England as well as other parts of the UK.

Karen Foley:

Gosh, a lot going on there.

Well thank you very much Gerry Mooney for filling us in on that.

Gerry Mooney:

No that's great Karen. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you about these issues, thank you.

Karen Foley:

Thank you very much Gerry Mooney.

Well that is the last of the books that we have time to cover in this edition of the PodMag. Congratulations to Paul Stenner from Social Sciences and Janette Rutterford from the Faculty of Business & Law. Two Open University colleagues who've been given an Award of Fellow from the Academy of Social Sciences in addition to 40 other leading social scientists. This is a really prestigious peer reviewed award.

Janette is a Professor of Financial Management of the Open University Business School and has demonstrated innovative research in the history of investment with a particular focus on investor behaviour and its impact on corporate financial policy and financial governance.

And Paul Stenner is a Psychologist and a leading figure in a new interdisciplinary field of psychosocial studies. He is also an international authority on Q methodology and quantitative methods in psychology.

Well done both.

I hope you've enjoyed this edition of the PodMag and if there is something you'd like to include in the future please email us at PodMag@open.ac.uk

You can also enjoy participating in our Friday Thinker activities each week on the OU Social Sciences Facebook page and follow us on Twitter which is @OUSocSci.

That's all for now. Thanks for listening.