



John Helliwell Interview Transcript

JOHN 0:10

Welcome to the Heads Up Community Mental Health podcast. Join our host Jo de Vries with the Fresh Outlook Foundation as she combines science with storytelling to explore a variety of mental health issues with people from all walks of life. Stay tuned.

JO 0:32

Hey, Jo here. Thanks for joining me and Dr. John Helliwell, an internationally acclaimed economist and well-being researcher, who is a co-founder and editor of the World Happiness Report. The 10th anniversary edition of the report was just released. So it's timely for me to chat with John about the 2022 findings, changes in reported happiness over the decade, the report's impact on policies and programs, and where the research can take us over the next number of years.

Before we dig in, though, a big thank you to our sponsors for this episode, the Social Planning and Research Council of BC, Emil Anderson Construction, WorkSafeBC, and AECOM Engineering.

John is truly a Canadian treasure. He is brilliant, and his list of accomplishments and publications is as long as my arm. To check those out, please visit the show notes for this episode at freshoutlookfoundation.org/podcasts. Welcome John, so thankful to have you here with us.

JOHN 1:42

Nice to be here.

JO 1:43

And congratulations on your 10th anniversary edition of the World Happiness Report.

JOHN 1:49

It doesn't seem like 10 years, but 10 years it's been.

JO 1:53

Published by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the report uses global data collected by Gallup to identify and rank how people in more than 150 countries evaluate their lives. So before talking about the nuts and bolts of research for the project, I'd first like to dig into your history, John. Tell us the story of how as a researcher with broad-based interests, you began seeing and exploring the links between economic prosperity, social capital, subjective well-being, and happiness at all scales.

JOHN 2:33

Like most findings by researchers who see themselves as being open to follow new interest, I particularly am an empiricist, and I'm interested in what I can learn from finding out what's going on in the world. When I was in the Mackenzie King Chair of Canadian studies at Harvard for several years in the early 1990s, one of my colleagues there, Robert Putnam in the Political Science Department, was developing a version of social capital, which he used as a core concept coming out of his work on Italy. I started working with him both on measuring social capital and finding out what it does to various things in particular. I did a paper with him on economic growth and social capital in Italy, finding out what some of the consequences of social capital may be.

I should mention what social capital is in that literature. It's usually measured by some combination of the extent to which people do things with other people, and the extent of trust they have in each other and in the systems in which they work. Just by listing those components, it's pretty clear they should be important for all of life, and not just what happens to the economic growth in that country.

One of his findings from US data was that in those parts of the US where social capital were higher, people were happier. And I said, "What do you mean people happier?" He said, "We've got these data showing how happy people are with their lives." And I said, "Well in economics we've been doing without those for two or three centuries, assuming there were no such data. That would allow us to stop assuming what made people happy and guessing that it was material things if we really did know what made them happy." So I immediately went around and searched for data from around the world, and it turns out there was a World Value Survey happening occasionally since the early 1980s. And it turns out that Statistics Canada, as an international leader in this field had actually been measuring life satisfaction in Canada since the 1980s.

So then, of course, the research project was to see, do these data actually tell intelligence stories about the quality of people's lives? Are those stories credible? Do they have good predictive power in various ways, and do they give us insights into how our lives are and how they may be made better? And the answers to all those questions kept turning up, yes. And so that's how I then got drawn into it.

After that research started in the 1990s, I was quickly drawn into positive psychology where some of these things were already starting to happen, and then formed close collaborations with Ed Diener and Danny Kahneman, who were the leaders in psychology in this field at the time. That's where I got started. And like a lot of things, if you're finding something that looks important, and results are showing that the data are important, then you become involved both in understanding the data you have and trying to create a better understanding of it for others, and also broader availability.

So much of the research has been trying to convince people who collect data and distribute it, that these data are important. And you could imagine how the World Happiness Report is a central part of that process, because it's done much, much more to make the Gallup world poll data publicly understood, accessed, and used than otherwise would have been the case.

JO 6:06

What a fascinating career, you're a consummate dot connector.

JOHN 6:10

If the dots are interesting enough, it doesn't take a whole lot of effort to push you to try and connect them.

JO 6:15

So getting back to report basics, tell us about the research and reporting tools and methods that you use.

JOHN 6:17

The basic data themselves are collected as part of the Gallup World Poll using standard statistical methodology, representative random sampling, or cluster sampling in each population. The methods are a mixture of telephone interviews and in-person interviews with some increasing use of a mixture of online methods. Using these global data, we can actually measure six general factors through the World Happiness Report. The two primary, and as it were, traditional measures in the development literature are income per capita, and healthy life expectancy. And the other four variables reflect what we call a social context of well-being.

And they tap into things that are already shown to be important by a variety of experimental work in mainly psychology, but also other disciplines. And they include first and foremost a measure of personal social connection. And that Gallup question that we use is, do you have someone to count on in times of trouble? Simple, yes or no.

The second one of these four variables is trust. The measures they used is, do you think that there is a problem in your country with corruption in business, corruption in government, and we use the average of those two. Then there is a sense of freedom. Do you have a feeling of freedom to make your key life decisions? That turns out to be a very important support for people's well-being.

And finally, and this is something that didn't play such an important part in Aristotle's musings, but it's very important in modern life, and it's very important in our results, is generosity. People like living in a generous society, and they are happy when they themselves are operating in a pro-social, kind way, as well as being in society where other people do as well.

JO 8:17

As a key player in this initiative, how would you define happiness?

JOHN 8:22

Happiness is an ambiguous term. There are really two meanings of the word happiness that are critically important here. One is the emotion of happiness. How happy were you yesterday? That quite clearly is an emotion and not a judgement about life as a whole. There's another way of using the word happiness, and that is judgmentally. How happy are you about the baggage retrieval system they have at Heathrow? Or in this context, how happy are you about your life as a whole, which is what we use to measure and rank countries across the world is in fact supported. As Aristotle said it would be when he said millennia ago that if you really want to find out how good the quality of life is you ask people in a reflective moment, and he has a list of things that would matter. And among those things that would matter, are indeed the emotional states people found themselves in.

And so modern research indeed finds that happiness, the emotion, is an important source of one's happiness about life as a whole. It's important to have this discussion about the two uses of the word happiness to stop people who are inclined to say otherwise, which you could imagine why they would be say, this is just fluff to talk about happiness when the world is suffering.

The point is happiness as an emotion doesn't indeed not cover the whole range of human experience. But your life evaluation as a whole does cover that and so happiness the emotion is part of what supports a life you can be happy with. But it also requires a whole lot of other things, including a sense of purpose in life, as Aristotle also said. And indeed, a feeling that you are doing the right thing, typically, and connecting with others in ways that you're proud of and they're happy about

JO 10:15

How has the report changed over 10 years?

JOHN 10:19

The report has been quite stable in its structure. The very first report did not do much to draw together a systematic explanation of what the rankings were. In the second report, late 2013, we did some modeling of what, we now have data for several years, what it is that characterizes life in the happier countries versus the less happy, because everybody at once went to this in order to find out how their country did. But then quite naturally, they wanted to know more about why. What is it that characterizes life in the happier versus the less happy countries?

The nice thing about that was it was drawing people to subsequent development, which has been a part of every report since is that it drew people into looking for an understanding of what led to a better life. The downside is that people now talk about us producing a happiness index. And then they say countries have this value because they have X or Y things, and we keep reminding people that what we do not do, as many other people do, is produced an index that would be imposing our judgment on what, in fact, is something where we use no judgement at all.

We simply present the average value for each country for a period of three years of 1000 people per year, who are asked the question, think of your life as a ladder with the best possible life as a 10, and the worst as a zero. How would you rate your life today? So it's not our judgment about who's happy and who isn't happy. It's the judgments of the people who live in those countries about the quality of their own lives. We then go on and try and explain those differences. But the primary point we want to make, and what gives the information real value is that it's based on what people think.

JO 12:18

So if I google this year's World Happiness Report, what am I going to find there?

JOHN 12:24

The simple answer to that question is in the newspapers of Country X, there will be a headline about what's going on in country X, or in country Y, where that's their neighboring country or their comparator country. But when you dig deeper, and thank goodness now many, many more people are digging deeper, they're going to say, "Who were the higher-ranking countries, and what's going on there that isn't going on here." So that's triggering people into a deeper look.

I'm also happy to report that reaction to this year's report has picked up something that we made quite a bit of in this year's report, because it wasn't expected when it turned up. And we hope it indeed signals something that's of importance for the future. During the first and second years of COVID, there was a rise in negative emotions. Particularly, worry and sadness rose in the first year of COVID, and then moved back closer to typical levels in the second year. But overall life evaluations were strikingly resilient to COVID.

What we found in 2020, was not much change in pro social activities. Measurements are for donation and volunteering, where anything down and you can imagine why being shut in would do that. And helping of strangers, which was a bit of a surprise, was significantly up. The Real News in this year's report was that in 2021, we found in every one of the world's 10 regions, a significant increase in people doing things for other people. And the increase was especially great in helping strangers, but it was also significant in donations, and in volunteering.

JO 14:09

Other notable findings from this year's report?

JOHN 14:13

In this year's report, we looked back over 10 years, sensibly enough because it's the 10th anniversary, in two dimensions and these are both important. One is what's happened to happiness over this period, and the other is what's happened to the study of happiness over this period and the use of happiness in the making of public policy, and in the way people write about the world, and the way they see the world.

Chapter three of this year's report went back and you now through analytics can see how frequently words are used. So naturally, there was no use of the World Happiness Report as an expression before it was created. But ever since 2012, the use of that word in books has been rocketing up. If you compare it to the widespread expression beyond GDP, which was something that was in the zeitgeist before there was a World Happiness Report, it rose rapidly and has been a sharp incline ever since. But World Happiness Report term has passed through that and is now much more frequent still. So that's telling us that people are reading it. And they're not only reading it, they're making use of it in their fiction and nonfiction writings.

Another thing that is relevant is that you've now got a whole industry of people in the Nordic countries that are special because five Nordic countries are always in the top ten. People are saying, "Oh, if these are the people who are happiest with their lives, we should be asking what's going on there." There has been a pivot. Before there was a World Happiness Report, there was no such interest in the Nordic countries as being special places to study life, because there may be lessons there. And now the books, and papers, and studies, and interviews on this topic are quite extraordinary in their range. To us of course that's exactly right, because you want to help people to understand what makes for a better life. And it's nice if you've got some examples. And they can be from all over the world.

Of course, they're not just in the Nordic countries. It's nice if you have those to go to. I already told you about the increasing focus on happiness. And there's been a number of public policy ventures, governments that have picked it up as a focus for their policies. There's a well-being economy alliance, including Finland, and Iceland, and Scotland, and others, and New Zealand, which has made it a focus of their attention as well. We then have a review of what's happened in the world, how happy are people now compared to ten years ago.

So we have a list of countries that are major gainers in the last 10 years, major losers in the last 10 years, and then look at the specific emotions and what's happened to them over this 10 years. We have found globally, an increase in stress and worry over this, not a huge but definite, life evaluations roughly on a constant global average with these increases and decreases in specific countries.

JO 17:27

Such valuable information. How has your report audience grown and changed over 10 years?

JOHN 17:35

In terms of growth and the readership, it's been quite striking. Ways of measuring it are changing through time. I think in the last edition, there were more than seven million people who accessed it, and that's probably growing. The actual close in readership and use of the data is probably biggest among students in many disciplines. It's quite remarkable, the range of the disciplines that are involved. And from our point of view, that's exactly right, because you won't get the knowledge that's created in the science of well-being being put to any useful purpose, and tell the people studying the underlying professions, the medical profession, criminology, profession, education, design of public services, criminology, all of these disciplines.

There are key findings that if they don't know them, and if they don't know the research, they won't design their policies right. And so there has to be a real sea change. And we often say, "Well, we're doing essentially for well-being what's been done for climate science," and say, "Look how long that took." Now, Rachel Carson was 50 years ago. And there was really not much knowledge about what global climate was and how it was changing, and what were the underlying models and frameworks. And now that science is much deeper and broader. And now, other disciplines are starting to do what they need to do to understand the consequences of global climate change.

Well, we're starting later, but with the capacity to work faster in well-being. And so, we're a long way from this being something that everybody understands. And it's the core feature of how you design a curriculum or a way of dealing with your patients in a general practice, or how you design prison systems. We're a long way from that. But to get there, you have to first of all, build this broader public understanding that we're working on here.

I have to give you the wallet dropping story because it's critically important in all of this, that people are really happy living where they think other people trust them, and where they think other people watch their backs. So that when we were first trying to measure trust, some of my skeptical research colleagues that are political scientists, said this general trust question says, do you think people can be trusted or not? We don't know what that means. So we designed a question that said, if you lost a wallet with \$200 in it, this going back 20 years, a big amount of money, how likely is it to be returned if it was found by, A police officer, B a neighbor, C a clerk in your local store, D a stranger? And we found that people who believe they lived in that environment are much happier.

Even more importantly, that gave the potential for actually having experiments. So the Toronto Star without realizing there was this underlying science being developed, they dropped 20 wallets in downtown Toronto. We've managed to get this trust question built into the Canadian General Social Survey of Statistics Canada. So we knew exactly what probability there was for wallets to be returned, if found by strangers, by residents of downtown Toronto. And it was about 25 percent thought that their wallet would be returned. Well, there were 20 wallets dropped and 80 percent of them were returned.

Another team then started dropping wallets in 40 countries. And by then, we'd also managed to get the wallet question into another round of the Gallup World Poll. And we were able to show that people were very good. The countries where people thought wallets would be returned, in fact, were returned. So it isn't that people are just crazy in their assessments when they answer these questions. They're very good. But they're also very bad. They're very good in the sense that the people in different countries are

right as between the countries of the likelihood of wallet being returned. But they're uniformly pessimistic.

So in every country, the actual return of wallets is higher than what people expect it will be. Well, that really means we're shooting ourselves in the foot by people thinking they're living in an untrustworthy environment. And why of course, because they read the stories of media, both social antisocial, asocial, and conventional, that leads them to think that the world is full of bad people doing bad things. They never get the story of the world as it is, which is in general, people being good to each other, people wanting to be good to each other, and people looking for opportunities to do things for other people.

In this research group sponsored by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, which I will doff my hat to anytime I get a chance because they invited me, and this was a third support, going back to the beginning for this research. They invited me and George Akerlof, I think in 2002, to start trying to collaborate in starting an interdisciplinary international research group in social identity and well-being. And as part of that, this brought together sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, economists from around the world.

Some of the experimental work in an elder care facility in Exeter in the UK, found the people who were involved in designing their own lives were much happier. The experiment was to move from an old facility to a new facility. They took the people in the unhappy floor, and asked them, forced them to design their own social spaces in the new building. People in the happy floor were given professional advice and professionals did it for them, using the best of understood practices.

Well, you can guess where this is going. When they moved across, the professionals looked at what the amateurs had done in designing their own social space together, and they said, "They'll never use that, that's a real mistake." But of course, the people who'd actually designed their own social spaces used them much more. They had subsequently much better connections with each other and much better physical health, than the ones who were using the top-down professionally designed facilities. So just being the architect with others of your own future is critically important in living longer and happier lives.

We took this result through the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research to a meeting of people in Ontario running care homes. A woman sitting beside me tapped my arm and said, "I've got a story for you on this." And she said, "Well, we have a group of care homes to the west of Toronto, and we were having real problems last summer, because most of our caregivers are women, often with children in the childcare facilities and the schools fall off in the summer. And so they have to take time off themselves. So what we did for three weeks in the summer was set up a daycare, right in the elder care facility, bouncy castles and all."

I said, "Well, that must have led you to break a lot of rules." And she said, "Yes, it did." I said, "Well, how did it work out?" She said, "Well, wonderfully." She said, "One way of proving that is that we have, like a lot of these facilities do with people in advanced care, a lot of people we call wanderers. And that's why we have to keep the doors locked to make sure they don't wander. During the three weeks, when that facility was in operation, not one of the wanderers tried to wander." Well, that tells you quite a few things. That tells you that wanderers aren't just wandering, they're trying to get out and go home. And it tells you, when you make a facility where people are living into something like a home, then they will feel at home, and they won't want to wander. So it means they've got a lot more mental capacities and

you credit them for and that that social environment is much more important than you ever paid attention to.

Okay, fast forward. This is a long story, isn't it? Anyway, let me push it a little further. I followed it up trying to find out whether there are any actual experiments going further, because in that meeting in Toronto, I said, "This is just changing how you decorate a space, or whether you have kids around for a couple of weeks in the summer. Shouldn't we be studying the mixing of the old and the young for mutual engagement in a much deeper way?" So I started looking around for examples of that. And we discovered one, and one we picked up on and taken deeply into our research plans is a program called iGEN in Saskatoon, where it takes the students from a public school and a whole grade six class is moved and taught entirely in the Sherbrooke facility in Saskatoon.

We thought because there was excess demand for this, we'd be able to have a control group of the students who wanted to get in and didn't, and the ones who did compare their lives thereafter. As COVID came along, and it grew difficult to do it quite that way, but nonetheless, we were able through a variety of Zoom interviews and other things, to get deep into the lives of the people, the children, their families, the teachers, the elders in the facility, and the workers in the facility. And every one of them was able to demonstrate that their lives were changed and changed for the better.

By having this experience where a key part of a child's life is put in, allowing them to interact with, be taught by, to have fun with people older and different from what they ever would have met otherwise. And of course, you could imagine, for the elders to have these bright young faces around, and the laughter, and friendship that came with it was essentially life giving. One of the key leaders among the elders said that their life had literally been saved by this. That's one of my favorite stories, because it really shows how important these social connections are, positive social connections are, and how we can actually do things differently in a way that really makes a big difference.

JO 27:47

When you and I first chatted, you talked about the report being a tool to support upstream or prevention-focused Mental Health Solutions. That story is a perfect example of that.

JOHN 28:00

Very much so. I've been involved a lot with applications within healthcare. There's a group of epidemiologists in Toronto with whom I have been working on this. Sparked by the availability of the subjective well-being data, they then took these huge samples of life satisfaction data, they contacted the people who had been surveyed and said, "Can we for research purposes, link the information you gave on the Canadian Community Health Survey to your subsequent health records?" And they got a very high buy in from the people who naturally were interested in having the science be developed further.

So they were able then to show with very high degree of assurance, that the people who are happier about their lives when the survey was taken, subsequently had less demand on medical care facilities, less morbidity, less mortality from a variety of sources. Even after you allowed for, and these you could because this came from the Community Health Survey, we knew exactly what all their other health problems was, so this is after accounting for everything else. So that we know that people's happiness is a very strong predictor of their future health.

Another element of this is mental health. I was invited to speak to the Public Health Conference in 2019, the last of these conferences that was held in public in large facilities in Ottawa, and they had a special panel on loneliness. Three members of that panel, which I was one, they were essentially saying there's an epidemic of loneliness. My reaction to that when explaining what a client's happiness has to say about that was, you don't wait until loneliness is a problem and then provide a cure for it. That's the bad way of dealing with it because, of course, it's already stigmatized. And so people don't come forward and they don't come forward until too late. You don't need a cure for loneliness, you need a vaccine to prevent loneliness. And that vaccine is called a friend.

So there's something called social prescribing that had already been developed in the UK and elsewhere, that when people do come in and give evidence of loneliness, if you like, then the GP or other person helping out can direct them towards places, activities they can join, to help others, and to help themselves, and to get the missing social contact. You don't wait 'til loneliness happens, and then try and make it better, you avoid it. And you avoid it, of course, by having a social environment available to everybody, in which they do feel connected, in which they do have a sense of community involvement.

And the beauty of that is that the community involvement itself isn't something that comes out of a fixed budget. The opportunities to deepen community development, of course, are good for the community, but they're also good for the individuals that do it. So there's an enormous range through the power of pro social actions, to give people a reason for living, and happiness in doing so that create a lot of win-win circumstances.

JO 31:21

John, getting back to your roots as an economist, how does happiness contribute to economic prosperity and vice versa? And how can those two be integrated?

JOHN 31:33

Well, the 18th century leaders in economics were in fact, philosophers. And they didn't see that kind of split. They thought that economics was and should be a moral science. The science of economics was supposed to think of smart ways of producing better lives. So the economics as it was conceived of, in its fuller sense by Bentham, and Smith, and Mill, and others, was much more in line of Aristotle. It was really saying, what kind of societies helped to produce better lives, and material prosperity became used in default, as the measure of what's good to support lives. And indeed, it's not unimportant.

So economics tended to be defined in the subsequent centuries by physical output. That, of course, wasn't what was in there at the beginning. So you could think of what we're doing is essentially taking economics back to its earliest roots and saying, well, now we have the science and the data to allow us to do economics the way it should have been done, right from the beginning. To start with a measure of what economists call utility, i.e. what makes you happy, we have a measure of people's happiness and then we can start to study about what are smart ways of operating not just your own life, and the lives of people in your family, in your neighborhood, but how you can design public institutions that foster the economic growth and the interaction between that and happiness.

It's been an important part of the research in economics because that's what economists have tended to do over the last 50 years. But as you can tell from the way I'm speaking, that's much too narrow a view. So I recognize that, and I started there myself, but it doesn't take very long to say, you really want to think much more broadly about this, regardless of which discipline you start from.

JO 33:32

Are the countries you're polling every year coming around to this line of thinking over time?

JOHN 33:39

Yes, slowly. And COVID has probably accelerated that, not just for individuals, but also for people who run institutions, that they're starting to think more about the quality of life, and not the quantity. And of course, they're seeing that these human relations are more important than they thought they were, than they may give them credit for being.

JO 34:03

The top 10 ranked countries in the 2022 report, as you mentioned, include Scandinavian countries, but also the Netherlands, Israel, and New Zealand. So what are these countries doing differently than the rest of us?

JOHN 34:19

Well, getting back to the wallet example, if you look around the world for where wallets most likely to be returned, it is indeed in the Nordic countries. A lot of people then say, "Oh, this is because they have cradle to the grave social care systems and social safety nets." And indeed, they do have very good social safety nets. Other people say, "Oh, it's just because they're homogeneous societies, and everybody's like them, and so it's easy to have them look after each other." Well, they do have good social safety nets, but they also have the happiest immigrants in the world. So, they have a much bigger and less self-centered foreign aid network, so they're among the world's biggest recipients of refugees, for example, per capita. Their own immigrants coming from, of course, all over the world are the happiest immigrants in the world.

So it's something about the way their society works there, rather than their homogeneity, that gives them this. It's easy to see what it is. And it isn't just because it's the wallets that are being returned. It isn't just a public system that's doing this. These are individuals who care about each other. So this caring for each other, turns out to be of fundamental importance, so all these various measures of generosity.

We had in the report this year, a special chapter on Eastern values, sponsored by a Japanese foundation that thought that most of psychology was Western centric, and didn't take proper account of Eastern values, and maybe was misrepresenting happiness, and what supported it. So in particular, they introduced into the poll questions asking about, do you have a sense of peace in your life? And to what extent do you think of others versus yourself and family? And to what extent do you feel connected to your society as a whole? And they were expecting these to be higher in the countries where a number of the long-standing cultural practices gave favor to that sense of peace, a sense of harmony. But we found that these feelings are important supporters of life evaluations all over the world. And indeed, they were found in the greatest frequency in the same countries that are at the top.

So, the Nordic countries have a higher sense of peace with their life than in other countries. So there's a great universality about what determines a happy life. Some people then say, "Well, of course, we all want to move to Helsinki." And of course, that's precisely the wrong advice. The whole point is all the things that are being done in Helsinki, they're quite different than the way Helsinki was two centuries ago. They were in pretty dire straits themselves. It's just that they fell on some nice procedures.

Some people say, "Hard climates make it easy to develop these neighbors helping each other kind of situations that grow into something bigger. Those kinds of practices can be taken up everywhere, in your neighborhood, elder care facility, or your neighborhood prison. And it doesn't require any level of income. It can be done equally well, in fact, it's almost easier to do when there isn't enough money around to create gates and fences.

JO 37:34

Canada is 15th on the 2022 list. Is that a good place to be, and how could we climb the ladder to a higher rank?

JOHN 37:44

We've been in better places. Canada is one of the countries that's had a significant decline. Over the last 10 years in the first report, Canada was number five. And Canada for the first, at least, five years of the report was always in the top 10. So for Canada, 15 is not a great position. Like the United States, it's come down. United States started at 11 and is now 16. We're now closer to the United States than we ever have been. Of the six factors of which I spoke, the only one in which the U.S. is higher than Canada is income per capita. On corruption, social trust, sense of freedom, and the other variables, Canada ranks higher.

Our modelling would suggest Canadians life evaluations should be higher than they are. In other words, the model fits. Canadians are being more unhappy with their lives, their performance on these other variables would suggest. So to me that's suggesting that, in fact, something's dragging Canadians down. And I think part of that is being, sort of, in the whole process of truth and reconciliation. People are reconsidering the past, and not with the kind of pride they might once have had. And at the moment, they're still focusing on what went wrong, whether a century ago or a decade ago or now, and not yet focusing enough on getting things better, because people are always happier when they're building something better, rather than when they're going over something that wasn't good.

So this sense of pride in Canada, and what we do, and the lives we lead, and how we live them is generally unassuming and non-boastful in its representations. But that doesn't mean it isn't important. That challenge may play some part in this. There's something else worth mentioning in the Canadian context, is that one of the big changes over the last 30 years has been what we call the quiet happiness revolution in Quebec. So that 30 years ago on the first data in 1980s and right into the 1990s, life satisfaction in Quebec, especially among francophones, was significantly below that in the rest of the country. That gap has been steadily eroded in the subsequent 20 years, and now it's true that any listing of the happiest communities will contain more than its share of Quebec communities. And of course, that process of Quebec converging from below up to the national average and even going through it, has drawn the national average up during that period.

One more qualification just to show you all numbers are not equally perfect, that if you look at the data for the Gallup World Poll, there's been some reduction in the average Canadian score over the last 10 years. If you look at the much larger Statistics Canada data sets coming from the Canadian Community Health Survey, there is no such decline, it's almost dead flat. All that said, for any country, there are ways of working together to build each other's lives up and eventually, of course, that will show in higher reports of average life evaluations. Inequality is bad for life evaluations. People like living in a society where people help each other. And they also liked living in a society where well-being is equally distributed. So you could see how a feeling that others have been left behind, or hurt, or damaged, would lead you to be less happy with your own life.

JO 41:13

The five lowest ranked countries include Rwanda, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. Why is that, and how can the report provide hope for these countries?

JOHN 41:26

We did have a chapter several years ago called Waiting for Happiness in Africa, which went through a number of the experiments that have been going on in Africa about ways of making lives better. The five countries you listed, you don't have to go much beyond the news reports to see plenty of reason why they're down there. Most of them have pretty low values for all the six variables we talked about. But on top of that, they're often countries with histories or geographies of intense conflict. Internal conflict is bad for pretty obvious reasons. So to allow people to find peace is obviously the best thing you can do.

One of the big supports to better lives in Africa, the biggest support, has been increase in life expectancy. Life expectancy over the last 10 years has gone up everywhere, but dramatically more so in Africa than elsewhere. And making the supports for healthier, longer lives more widely available has been, and still offers a big set of things we can do for them. And in meetings I've been with people in South Africa, and they said, "For goodness sakes, don't poach all our doctors."

JO 42:40

At the Fresh Outlook Foundation, we focus on community sustainability from a holistic perspective. We've talked about social, cultural, and economic factors, but I'm hoping you can share your perspectives on the link between happiness and a healthy environment.

JOHN 42:57

Typically, when we talk about a healthy environment, we'll be talking about an environment that's healthy in social terms, in physical environmental terms, and in human health terms. And they do tend to go together. When I speak to people who are looking for ways to mitigate, and reverse, and deal with climate change, I emphasize to them that the primary driver of human behavior, where it counts, is this sense of wanting to do the right thing for the future. And that's not because they're being forced to do it, it's not because they're being paid to do it, it's because they want to do it. But we now have this widespread feeling that the future generation deserves more attention than we've given it. So that people are looking for better ways to do things, and to create opportunities for people to develop themselves with their neighbors, ways of improving the environment, whether locally or contributing to something more global is a really positive thing they can do.

There were some experiments, not that recent but now 10 years ago, trip in Brazil, at some experiments they were doing there. One of the things they would do in some of the most difficult communities, is draw the community together and discuss what they might do to make the community better.

One of the most successful things they came up with with one community, was they had a terrible watercourse through the middle of this town. And they simply said, "Well, we want to do something. We don't want to talk about it. We want to do something." So they actually got together and they all went out and cleaned up that watercourse over a sequence of months. Yes, it got the watercourse cleaner, and everyone was proud about that. It actually made it much more useful and safer to use and so on, that environment was respected. But they found when they dug a little deeper, that this joint activity of people from all education levels, all income levels, all social classes, working together on the same job side-by-side, they developed an understanding, appreciation, and affection for each other that

they had never had before. So common action that mixes people with very different backgrounds can in fact deliver the kind of social cohesion, neighborhood belonging that in fact can bring social sustainability along with environmental improvements.

JO 45:25

We're on the homestretch now. The 2022 report overview says that quote, The prospects for happiness will depend on a whole range of factors, including the future course of the pandemic, and the scale of military conflict, unquote. First, what are your thoughts about the long-term impacts of COVID, and how might those be reflected in future reports?

JOHN 45:51

We have seen resilience in the face of COVID in terms of life evaluations. We have also seen in the most recent report, an upsurge all over the world in pro-social actions. So naturally, we're interested in studying and will be studying in the future, the extent to which these good works and good intentions reflect a change in people's views about the importance of connecting with other people in positive ways, or whether it's simply part of an accommodation to COVID that will disappear as people move back to their regular lives. So it's obviously of key importance for us in the world, to see whether these positive instincts for social connection can be maintained and improved.

JO 46:40

Alluding to military conflict, what about the short- and long-term impacts?

JOHN 46:46

What we do know from previous studies is that internal conflict and deaths are bad for well-being, you could imagine why. People like to live in peace and harmony, and when they're not, even if they're on the winning side of some conflict, it usually is not something that's going to last for long.

JO 47:03

The report overview also notes that another important contribution will come from improvements in the science of happiness. Can you look into your crystal ball and tell us how future science might be conducted, and what it might reveal?

JOHN 47:19

One of the things is we know a lot of these things that are related move together, so that married people are happier than those who aren't. But we know that happy people are more likely to meet and find good marriage partners. But we also know that good marriage makes for happy new partners. So what's going to be happening in many aspects of life is that people are going to be running experiments trying to disentangle where you can best enter in trying to improve somebody's life, and make the most difference with the most winners and the fewest losers.

So it'll become an applied science of well-being with a focus on all the various areas of life, where a focus on well-being, explicit focus on well-being, has simply not been the norm. People have used quite other judgments and measures for success. So once you adopt that measure of success, you need to then do a lot of subsequent work to figure out how you deliver on it.

JO 48:20

Thank you so much for joining me, John, and for your amazing work. I love the way your mind works, and I so admire your passion and dedication, which obviously have contributed hugely to our global understanding of human health and happiness. Is there anything you'd like to share in closing?

JOHN 48:40

People often say, "Leave it to the government to do something better." A lot of our lessons are for governments and people who run institutions. But my advice to individuals is always go back and say, you know, life is very local, and the support for a good life are very local. That being the case, there's a whole lot you can do to deliver happier lives for other people by simply starting tomorrow and to treat strangers as friends you haven't met. And to make sure that next traffic interaction is a wave and not a finger.

JO 49:12

Great advice, thank you.

JOHN 49:14

My pleasure.

JO 49:15

So that's a wrap. To connect with John and his work, visit freshoutlookfoundation.org/podcasts. There you'll find his contact info, complete bio, and list of resource links.

Another big thank you to our sponsors for this episode, the Social Planning and Research Council of BC, Emil Anderson Construction, WorkSafeBC, and AECOM Engineering. And thanks to you as well for hanging out with us, you are very much appreciated.

Please visit our website to sign up for monthly e-newsletters, which will alert you to new episodes of the podcast, and our other programming. And for programming information as it drops, follow us on Facebook at FreshOutlookFoundation and Twitter at FreshOutlook. In closing, be well and let's connect again soon.