

Happiness as a source of public policy

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Last September's international Pangkor Dialogue witnessed then urban wellbeing, housing and local government minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan calling for a fresh economic "narrative" that is not too dependent on gross domestic product (GDP)-based or conventional aggregate-based evaluation.

He cited two exemplary models based on "happiness research", namely Bhutan's GNH (Gross National Happiness), and the OECD's (Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development) "wellbeing index".

"Happiness research", decades ago, was considered a revolutionary approach in economics, but is now rapidly adopted worldwide in various fields, including sociology, psychology, politics and human development. Malaysia is no exception.

For instance, a July survey by Jobstreet.com last year revealed that 52 per cent of Malaysian workers were unhappy with their jobs.

Interestingly, materialistic concerns, such as income or salary, did not make it to the top list. Instead, the top-three causes of dissatisfaction were management and leadership teams, career development opportunities and boss/immediate superiors.

This suggests that if one were to measure the wellbeing of a worker based on his monetary earnings, the results would be far from the truth. What makes happiness research revolutionary is that it measures "subjective wellbeing". People are asked their own personal and subjective evaluation of their lives.

This offers invaluable insight, and provides a more holistic picture to human wellbeing, something not achievable if we rely solely on external observations, such as income, wealth, spending habits, health, debt ratio and so forth. So, does "happiness" have a place in Islam?

Extensive evidence suggests that the answer is highly in the affirmative.

God Almighty is illustrious in His intentions to provide humans with ease and facilitation, and protect against grief and hardship: "And we have not sent you, (O Muhammad) except as a mercy to the worlds" (Quran 21:107), and "Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship" (Quran 2:185).

Also, Muslim philosophers and scholars had long articulated happiness in various terms, such as: *falāḥ*, *farḥah*, *sa'ādah*, *tama'ninah*, *ḥayātan ṭayyibah*, *masrūroh* and *sakīnah*.

These terms can be found in the extensive works of Al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawayh, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Al-Qayyim and S.M.N. Al-Attas. Certainly, happiness is a well-established topic in Islamic scholarship.

However, a more interesting question is how does Islam relate to the contemporary findings of happiness research?

Let's take one example. Research has shown that more money does not always make us happier *ad infinitum*.

For instance, a RM1,000 increase in monthly income to a poor person would invariably improve his wellbeing and make him very happy. Yet, as a person becomes wealthier, the same RM1,000 would mean less.

To a billionaire for example, that amount would be negligible to his wellbeing. This, in economic jargon, is called "diminishing marginal utility".

This supports the conclusion that people who are materialistic "tend to be substantially less happy". One of the reason is simply that the endless pursuit of materialism will ultimately reward them less and less happiness, and thus, bound to lead towards frustration.

Therefore, it is suggested that eternal happiness is not achieved only in this world. In Islam, ultimate happiness rests solely on God since He is the source of all happiness (Quran 10:58). But one is also reminded to avoid extremes, and remain steadfast to the path of moderation (*ummah wasatan* — Quran 2:143).

This especially entails having a balanced world view between the eternal and temporal life. Several other findings in happiness research that resonate with Islamic principles are as follows.

THE "relative income" factor: research shows that despite being relatively blessed with material possessions, one can be unhappy if he constantly self-compares with others who are "above" him.

The Prophet, in a renowned hadith, advised believers to "Look at those who are beneath you..." in terms of material wealth (but look upwards in terms of spirituality). This message of gratitude is also reiterated in the Quran, promising that those who are "grateful" will receive even more (Quran 14:7).

THE social capital: it is found that public policies that emphasised social trust and harmony yielded higher happiness levels.

This resonates with Islam's emphasis on its periodical, consistent and practical social programmes, which include daily prayer congregations, weekly Jumaah prayer, bi-annual large eid gatherings, international-level Mecca pilgrimage, annual and continuous zakah (charity) to the poor, annual meat sacrifice to feed the poor, and so forth.

FREEDOM and autonomy: research shows that "procedural utility", or the ability to make important life decisions, such as career path, personal values, choosing our government and so forth can improve life satisfaction and make us happier.

Freewill and moral autonomy are deeply ingrained in the Quranic message, frequently asking the reader to “choose” and “deliberate” despite nudging to the side of truth — (Quran 91:8).

The environment: multiple researches have established that humans are happier when surrounded by pristine and natural environment.

The Quranic message is emphatic in regards to the environment: “And do not commit abuse on the earth!” (Quran 2:60).

In a famous hadith, the Prophet proscribed wasting water during ritual ablution “even if you are on the bank of a flowing river”.

The remarkable affinity between happiness research and Islamic teachings makes it a beneficial model for syariah-based public policies.

This apparent compatibility also makes it a prime candidate to be considered as one of the Maqasid al-Syariah (higher purposes of syariah).

In fact, when analysed, we can see that happiness is intrinsic to the five traditional “essentials” of the Maqasid (the protection of life; preservation of religion; upholding the integrity of the human intellect; protecting the family and protection to lawfully-owned property).

We, thus, conclude that happiness research is essential in the field of Islamic public policy.

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