

HOW TO FIND HAPPINESS: NEW MATERIALISM, LEISURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Barbara Humberstone

Buckinghamshire New University, UK

By sharing our resources more equally, by building better communities and a better society and by safeguarding the natural environment, we can focus on the things that really matter and achieve genuine and lasting progress with higher levels of well-being. Taken together this would amount to what we have termed the *Great Transition*. (Spratt, Simms, Neitzert, and Ryan-Collins, 2010: p.10)

The narrow focus of 'profane' media [*leisure & sport*] studies on semiotics and consumption ignores the extent to which culture is rooted in our deep yearning for the sacred. (De la Fuente, 2011: p. 39) (*italics added*)

Introduction

Leisure, at least from the perspective of the leisure taker, is about pleasure and — with notable exceptions — well-being. A pertinent question leisure research may well consider worth addressing is concerned with how well-being or even happiness is understood and experienced from a variety of perspectives. There is a significant proliferation of national government surveys that attempt to collect data on the 'happiness' of its people, including the British government's recent, arguably perhaps misplaced, attempts. One might be excused for wondering whether the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding might be gained for discovering and producing some chemical to be put in the tap water that would make everyone feel happy. This is not that far from reality, given the

extended dispute in Southampton and surrounding area regarding the Southampton Health Authority's determination to add fluoride to the drinking water to reduce the tooth decay amongst children in Southampton against local people's on-going and vehement rejection highlighted through records of the dispute and so called consultation¹. If our dental health can be maintained by added chemicals then why not our mental health too, we may well ask?

The question of happiness, or what makes people happy, has been debated by philosophers, theologians, and others for eons. Recently the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), one of many bureaucratic organisations looking to find an answer to this question, completed its 'Better Life Index' survey (OECD, 2011), which attempted to "objectively determine the happiest countries in the world". The Index is based on eleven measures of quality of life including housing, income, the environment, jobs, community, education, health, work-life balance and life satisfaction. Writing in the 24/7 Wall Street Journal in June, Sauter, Stockdale & McIntyre (2011) took life satisfaction as a substitution for 'happiness' and compared 'life satisfaction' scores to other measurements to find the economic and socio-political 'realities' that had the highest and lowest correlation to happiness.

According to this scoring system, Denmark was found to come out on top in the life-satisfaction score; that is, Danish people rated themselves as the happiest of the developed countries consistently for a number of years in several studies. According to Sauter *et al.* (2011) this is "surprising, considering the Scandinavian country received only average scores for several metrics that other highly satisfied countries consistently perform well in". It has a high tax percentage of gross national product (GNP), which places Denmark among the bottom of developed countries for disposable income. However, according to the OECD's survey, Danish government policy is one of the most 'leisure-friendly'. Danish citizens spend more than 16 hours per week on leisure time, and according to the survey Denmark has the greatest level of equality of income amongst the developed countries. Simply stated, according to the OECD survey, Danes pay more taxes, have significantly less difference in income between earners, have more leisure time and rate themselves, for the last ten years, as the most happy amongst developed countries. Denmark, together with other Scandinavian countries (which also rated themselves high on happiness in the survey), has a strong outdoor leisure culture, which is known as '*friluftsliv*' [open-air living]. Outdoor classes exist in preschool and main school; children are expected to spend time out of doors even

in the very cold, snowy conditions. Babies are pulled in sledges behind a parent on cross-country ski trips from hut to hut in temperatures well below zero C.

There are a number of reasons for my pointing out this particular analysis of the OECD Better Life Index which may become apparent. Next the chapter draws attention to recent research on well-being and green spaces.

Well-being and green spaces

Over the last ten years substantial evidence has accumulated that suggests that being in nature or in a natural environment has considerable health and well-being benefits for all ages of the population. Hinds & Sparks (2008) examine how natural environment engenders positive environmental orientations and psychological well-being. Bird (2007) reports evidence of positive effects from contact with nature and green space on mental health and argues that there is a significant quantity of work that supports this in suggesting that contact with many aspects of nature benefits mental health in quite dramatic and unexpected ways. Likewise Maller *et al.*'s (2008) review highlights wilderness and related studies demonstrating that being in a natural environment affects people positively, particularly in terms of mental health with multiple benefits accruing, even from brief encounters with nature. O'Brien *et al.* (2010) and O'Brien *et al.*'s (2011) substantial work on forests provides strong evidence for the restorative benefits of green space for people and potential for social contact. This research evidences the considerable benefit to well-being and particularly mental health for all ages of the population. Muñoz's (2009) literature review on health, outdoors and children's research, highlights the links between children's use of outdoors spaces and health outcomes. Muñoz argues in light of this review that green space in children's learning environments can provide significant developmental benefits. She states that "This literature review has also revealed the focus within research on examining the (re)connection of children with nature and the outdoors within the educational context" (p. 24).

Unfortunately, despite this apparent attention to educational contexts there are significant omissions in this meta-analysis as it fails to mention any of the considerable publications based upon research in outdoor education and outdoor learning field nationally and internationally. For example, the review makes no reference to research published in any of the dedicated outdoor education journals such as *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, *New Zealand Journal of Outdoor Education*, *Journal of Experiential Education* and the

international *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*. However, despite the outdoor education and learning field having such a significant legacy of research published in these journals, the field has tended to be restricted in the use of other disciplinary outlets for its research, thus somewhat limiting its reach (Humberstone, 2009). There is currently a woeful lack of connection or engagement between a number of distinct research fields such as nature-based educational experiences (outdoor education, outdoor learning), nature-based sport (also referred to as adventure or alternative or life-style sport, see for example Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003; Wheaton, 2004; Wheaton, 2010) and the work identified above regarding health, well-being and green/outdoor space. Despite these missing links, what all the aforementioned reviews and studies identify is that there is a complex inter-relationship between human health and well-being (particularly mental health) and being in the natural environment. Add to these findings the condition of Scandinavian countries — in particular the Danish scenario presented earlier, where outdoor leisure life is central to cultural mores and where life satisfaction/ happiness scores were high — and we are provided with substantial evidence for the importance of green space and the natural environment and its impact in various ways on well-being for everyone's lives.

Care is needed, nevertheless, as much research arguing the therapeutic effect of the outdoors has tended to draw from the adventure/wilderness therapy industry which may, on occasion, be glib, introspective, uncritical, unsituated and unhistorical (Humberstone, 2011). Recently, however, there have emerged notable exceptions where the research is both contextualised and critical (see for example Richards et. al., 2011). This chapter now turns to ideas emerging from the New Economic Foundation (NEF) and its recent paper — Great Transition — from which the earlier quotation was taken, and briefly considers a 'new materialism'.

Great Transition — new materialism

The Great Transition (Spratt, Simms, Neitzert, and Ryan-Collins, 2010) is a treatise from the NEF on how the world could/should be, a new materialism, something of an echo from or refraction of Thrift's (2004, 2006, 2008) thinkings/imaginings. This treatise is about shifting the realities of the world of economic, social and environmental crisis we currently and variously experience into a different world based on economies that value social and environmental 'good', rather than what is termed social and environmental 'bads', the latter having only monetary value but little or no social benefits. I am certainly no

economist but it is clear to me that taking out forests of all kinds in order to harvest meat for mass consumption or palm oil for fuel might well provide economic profit in the short term. However, the consequent 'bads' — such as destruction of the world's lungs, reduction in biodiversity and the displacement of indigenous peoples and wildlife — far outweigh any economic value and have considerable long-term bad material as well as bad emotional effects. These bads are not only local and individual but are also social and global. Life-satisfaction, happiness or well-being (particularly mental) within an economically more equal society, such as that exemplified by Denmark, has everything to do with how one feels about being in the world. What seems to be of interest here concerns our embodiment in the world and all the sensations that go with that.

"The new sense of materialism", writes Thrift (2008: p. 123), "challenges a whole series of traditional divisions between organic-inorganic; science-art, space and time ... in its hunger to redefine how the world is/could/should be". Although this deconstruction is not new, what is refreshing is the drawing of attention to the significance of the interconnections between our sense of being in the world and wider social, economic, political and environmental concerns, the emotional and expressive and the nudge to work with complexity. How we might re-envision and experience ourselves and contexts differently 'better' are contemplated through shifting and fluctuating space and time.

Manifest in Thrift's re-imaginings of space, time and motion is the call for empirical evidence; or in other words the need to ground these speculations, sometimes of hope, in the experiential, mobile and the spatial. I argue elsewhere (Humberstone, 2011a) for the potential in exploring the nexus of embodiment and practice in nature-based sport. At this junction the performing body feels and senses, delighting in its performance in nature spaces. On occasions, a sublimeness can be evoked in awe and wonderment of the moment and may even provoke the seeds of social and environmental action (see Humberstone, 2011a). The next sections briefly look at embodiment, the senses and the longing for wonderment drawing upon the calls for more experiential, phenomenological approaches to researching what it means for individuals to 'be' in, and experience, the world.

Senses, embodiment, space and movement

Thrift (2008) returns to earlier concepts of the body and the problematic of affect, intertwining of notions of movement, inclination, passion and their potentiality by drawing on the philosopher Spinoza.

For Spinoza, the body was one with its transitions. Each transition is accompanied by a variation in its capacity: a change in which powers to affect and be affected are addressable by a next event and how readily addressable they are or to what degree they are present as futurities. That degree is bodily intensity, and its present futurity a tendency. The Spinozist problematic of affect offers a way of weaving together concepts of movement, tendency and intensity in a way that takes us right back to the beginning: in what sense the body coincides with its own transitions and its transitionings with its potential. (Massumi 2002 cited in Thrift 2008: p. 128)

Large-scale statistical surveys on international and national profiles on such big issues as 'life-satisfaction' or more especially happiness, mentioned previously, are significant since they can throw up connections that might otherwise not be expected. Small-scale interpretive studies and narrative inquiries are crucial in understanding how people make sense of, and experience, their worlds as embodied beings. Happiness or well-being is complexly bound up in our emotions. How people felt about being in their worlds was what people responded to in these surveys. Their responses on life-satisfaction/happiness reflect their embodiment in the world which according the OECD large scale study was related to characteristics of equality and, together with evidence from other studies, is enhanced through positive engagements with nature. Embodiment, 'performance' and even awesomeness come together in different nature spaces providing for a sense of well-being.

Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) and Allen-Collinson, 2011, who centre the body in their research, examine the aural, visual, olfactory and haptic senses and highlight the significance of these sensory aspects in the analysis of sporting embodiments. They take a phenomenological approach to examine bodily experiences that is both experiential and ontological (Munch, 1994). Further, in recent research narratives, Hockey (2006) and Atkinson (2010) identify feelings of awe associated with the sensations and practices of running in the outdoors and on the fells respectively. Auto-ethnographic research has provided evocative narratives on sentience and sacred space in nature-based sport. For example, embodiment in physical activity in performing masculinities, captured in an auto-ethnographic account of surfing reflects the interconnections of affect (the sensing and feeling body) and emotions (Evers, 2004, 2006). For example Evers argues:

We feel our body and then we experience emotion. Affects are what we feel at the bodily level. Both emotion and affects rely on one another to organize and register our experience with the world. It is a situation of emotion in addition to affect. Emotions are a qualification of what is felt by the body ... Emotions are what happen when we attempt to own what performances feel like and sort out what we think bodies should be or do. (Evers, 2006: p.232)

Clearly then happiness, or well-being, is complexly bound up in our emotions and our bodily sensations. Furthermore, movement through nature provides continuously changing perceptions as we feel through our senses and embody these sensations. Ingold (2000: pp. 226, 230), notes that “people see as they move” and “our knowledge of the environment undergoes continuous formation in the very course of [our] moving in it”. Further, as Cresswell and Merriman (2011: p. 5) note, such “[M]obile, embodied practices are central to how we experience the world, from practices of writing and sensing, to walking and driving. Our mobilities create spaces and stories-spatial stories”. With this context in mind it is useful to note that, in nature-based physical activities, engagements between the body and the environment are different from those in conventional sport since there is flexibility rather than the imposition of bounded human rules upon the embodied context (Humberstone, 2011a). In nature-based activities, however, the body and its particular ‘equipment’ (which may only be the body itself when walking) must anticipate and react to the continually changing environment. In water-based activities such as kayaking, canoeing and windsurfing, where the seascape is fluid and mobile, the movement is rarely human rule bound and may generate significant sensations and emotions. We find this in particular research, writings and media representations emanating from surfing communities across the world.

For example, Taylor’s (2007) work on surfing draws upon surfing representations and research to highlight the way in which surfing is expressed and experienced as spiritual, highlighting the consequential development of environmentalism in these communities. Informed by feminist theories of the body and emotions such as those of Grosz and Probyn (1995), Evers’ (2004, 2006) biographical narrative research on masculinities and surfing men, evocatively draws attention to embodied multiple subjectivities, the affective and the numinous experience. Ethnographic and autoethnographic narratives are central in understanding how we feel about the world, our embodiedness and

wellbeing. It is, and this maybe a moot point, only through small scale interpretative research that it is possible to understand the sensations and emotions of 'happiness', even if large-scale surveys give us a hint of where it might be found.

The 'spiritual' or numinous spaces

De laFuente's (2011) article regarding media studies published in *The Times Higher Education* has much to say to leisure studies. He argues that "The narrow focus of 'profane' media studies on semiotics and consumption ignores the extent to which culture is rooted in our deep yearning for the sacred" (De la Fuente, 2011: p. 39). Consequently it is possible to argue that in leisure and sports studies there is in a sense, a shift, a turning towards (or back to) exploring the things that are awesome, that lift the emotions, that are sense and affect driven. Attention to notions of awesomeness or the sacred open up a number of interlinked pathways for shifting exploration, research and analyses in leisure. Taking seriously nature-based sport and leisure as embodied experience and acknowledging a sense of the sacred or wonderment may provide for socially nuanced and affected understanding of well-being or happiness. Legitimizing such a notion of wonderment can take account not only of ontological aspects of senses in motion but also the means of transmission of shared feelings or values through human embodiment and 'organisation' (Humberstone, 2011a).

Increased consciousness during physical activity has been referred to as 'flow' (Csikzentimihalyi, 1975) and testing has found that such 'peak' experiences are accompanied by physiological changes. This concept of flow, "whilst it gives a sense of a heightened and focused experience may obscure analyses of the embodiment, senses, and practice-in-nature nexus", thereby ignoring the significance of the social and 'political' of such experiences (e.g. Humberstone, 2011a: p. 505). By unravelling flow in the here and now, grounding it in the embodied affective of the person, and listening to the voices of those engaged in physical activity or recreation in nature, something suggesting a spiritual or transcendental experience can emerge. Thus what analysts conceptualise as flow alternatively can be understood as wonderment and, on some occasions, as 'spiritual' (Humberstone, 2011a). For a recreational windsurfer, "It's almost a spiritual thing [...] The simple physical feeling it gives you is great I think" (Dant and Wheaton, 2007: p. 11). The notion of numinous space and the spiritual sit well with nature-based leisure and sport. There is much writing and

research that draws attention to the senses and experiences of numinous spaces in nature-based activities. In *Between a rock and a hard place*, Ralston (2005: pp.16–17) refers to solo walking as “a sense of mindless happiness ... I think solo hiking is my own method of attaining a transcendental state, a kind of walking meditation”. Atkinson (2010) ponders similarities in the meanings and sensations of yogic practice as understood by the yoga practitioners and those articulated by fell runners of his study. Both, on occasion, refer to the sensations and experiences as in some sense spiritual.

Concluding remarks: shifting realities-drawing together and reassembling the threads

This chapter has highlighted different and shifting concepts and contexts of life-satisfaction, happiness and well-being. The reality that the Danes, who pay more taxes, have significantly less difference in income between earners, have more leisure time and rate themselves as the most happy amongst developed countries, also engage significantly in nature-based leisure or '*friluftsliv*' is worthy of comment and consideration. Shifting resources in ways that value social and environmental goods rather than 'bads', towards a new materialism, through exploration of the notion of a Great Transition is a postulate which might fruitfully engage the study of leisure. Arguably there is hunger for a new materialism, which for Thrift is a philosophical and practical re-imagining of space, time and motion. This chapter has argued that leisure studies takes seriously such re-imagining emanating from cultural geography, and has further suggested that a new materialism may also be expressed as a shift or turning towards the study of the 'sacred' as well as the profane in leisure studies.

Linking happiness or well-being with the postulated new materialism, this chapter draws attention to the complexity surrounding the inter-relationship between human and community well-being and the natural environment. It argues that how we feel about being in the world, the measure of life-satisfaction or feelings of happiness has much to do with our embodiment in social and environmental spaces. Happiness, or well-being, is complexly bound up in emotions. Such feelings and sensations make up the corporeality of the body. Consequently, this chapter argues that re-imagining and researching personal, social and economic realities in leisure studies has much to do with (re)-engaging with and turning towards 'mobile methodologies' and not satiating hunger for a new materialism and the spiritual but stimulating them.

Note

- ¹ The local Southampton daily newspaper, the *Daily Echo*, has recorded the events of this 'consultation' through its continuous reporting of the 'fluoride debate', from its inception and currently. At this time it is not yet resolved. What is ironic or even worrying is the fact that whilst "72 per cent of responses to the public consultation from those in the affected (sic) area opposing fluoridation, and 38 per cent against it in a separate phone poll (compared to 32 per cent in favour), ... it is clear the public don't want it. But SHA (Southampton Health Authority) chiefs unanimously approved the scheme, citing evidence showing it should reduce tooth decay" (Reeve, 2009).

References

- Allen-Collinson, J. (2011) 'Feminist phenomenology and the woman in the running body', *Sport, Ethics, Philosophy* Vol. 5, No. 3: pp. 297–313.
- Atkinson, M. (2010) 'Entering scapeland: Yoga, fell and post-sport physical cultures', *Sport in Society* Vol. 13, No. 7: pp. 1249–1267.
- Bird, W. (2007) 'Natural thinking: Investigating the links between the natural environment, biodiversity and mental health', Report for the RSPB [online]. Available at: URL www.rspb.org.uk/policy/health [Accessed 28Jan 2011]
- Cresswell, T. and Merriman, P. (2011) 'Introduction', in T. Cresswell and P. Merriman (Eds.) *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, pp.1–15.
- Csikzentimihalyi, M. (1975) *Beyond boredom and anxiety: Experiencing flow in work and play*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Dant, T. and Wheaton, B. (2007) 'An extreme form of material or embodied interaction', *Anthropology Today* Vol. 23, No. 6: pp. 8–12.
- De la Fuente, E. (2011, June 2) 'Signs and wonders', *Times Higher Education*, pp. 39–40.
- Evers, C. (2004) 'Men who surf', *Cultural Studies Review* Vol. 10, No. 1: pp. 27–41.
- Evers, C. (2006) 'How to surf (research and methodology)', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* Vol. 30, No. 3: pp. 229–243.
- Grosz, E., & Probyn, E. (eds) (1995) *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Hinds, J. & Sparks, P. (2008) 'Engaging with the natural environment: The role of affective connection and identity', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* Vol. 28: pp. 109–120.
- Hockey, J. (2006) 'Sensing the run: The senses and distance running', *Senses and Society* Vol.1, No. 2: pp. 183–202.
- Hockey, J., & Allen Collinson, C. (2007) 'Grasping the phenomenology of sporting bodies', *International Review for Sociology of Sport* Vol. 42, No. 2: pp. 115–131.

- Humberstone, B. (2009) "In splendid isolation" — Is the field missing something? Research in outdoor sports and outdoor education: Principles into practice', in I. Turcavana and A. Martin (eds) *Outdoor activities in educational and recreational programmes*. Prague: Charles University, pp. 40–65.
- (2011) 'The New Forest in UK: Well-being, the senses and young people's experiences', Paper presented at the EOE conference *Into the woods: About the significance of woods and wilderness for Youth work in Europe* October 7th Metsäkartano / Finland.
- (2011a) 'Embodiment and social and environmental action in nature-based sport: Spiritual spaces, special issue — leisure and the politics of the environment', *Journal of Leisure Studies* Vol. 30, No. 4: pp. 495–512.
- Ingold, T. (2000) *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.
- Maller, C., Townsend, M., St Leger, L., Henderson-Wilson, C., Pryor, A., Prosser, L., and Moore, M. (2008) *Healthy parks, healthy people: The health benefits of contact with nature in a park context A review of relevant literature*. Burwood, Melbourne: Deakin University.
- Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Münch, R. (1994) *Sociological theory: From the 1920s to the 1960s*. Chicago, IL: Nelson Hall.
- Muñoz, S. (2009) *Children in the outdoors: A literature review*. Forres, Scotland: Sustainable Development Research Centre.
- O'Brien, L., Williams, K and Stewart A. (2010) *Urban health and health inequalities and the role of trees, woods and forests in Britain: A review*. Report for Forestry Commission.
- O'Brien, L., Burls, A., Bentsen, P., Hilmo, I., Holter, K., Haberling, D., Pirnat, J., Sarv, M., Vilbaste, K. and McLoughlin, J. (2011) 'Outdoor education, life long learning and skills development in woodlands and green spaces: The potential links to health and well-being', in K. Nilsson. M. Sangster. C. Gallis. T. Hartig. S. de Vries. K. Seeland (eds) *Forests, trees and human health*. Springer Publications.
- OECD (2011) 'Your better life index: Country notes', Available at: URL www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/ [Accessed 08june2011]
- Ralston, A. (2005) *Between a rock and a hard place*. London: Pocket Books.
- Reeves, J. (2009, June15) 'Anger over Andy Burnham's fluoride link', *Dailyecho* (online) Available at: URL www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/4438815.Anger_over_new_health_boss_fluoride_link/
- Richards, K., Carpenter, C. & Harper, N. (2011) 'Making links to adventure therapy theory and international practice', *Outdoor and adventure therapy: Theoretical and international perspectives special issue Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* Vol. 11, No. 2.
- Rinehart, R., & Sydnor, S. (eds) (2003) *To the extreme: Alternative sports, inside and out*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Sauter, M. S., Stockdale, & McIntyre, D. (2011, June 6) 'US doesn't make cut for happiest nations list', *Wall Str. Journal* (on line) Available at: www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43287918/ns/business-world_business/t/us-doesnt-make-cut-happiest-nations-list/ [Accessed 06June2011]
- Spratt, S., Simms, A. Neitzert, E. and Ryan-Collins, J. (2010) *The Great Transition A tale of how it turned out right* London: New Economics Foundation.
- Taylor, B. (2007) 'Surfing into spirituality and a new, aquatic nature religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 75, No. 4: pp. 923–951.
- Thrift, N. (2004) 'Movement-space: The changing domain of thinking resulting from the development of new kinds of spatial awareness', *Economy and Society* Vol. 33, No. 4: pp. 582–604.
- (2006) 'Space', *Theory, Culture and Society* Vol. 23, No. 2–3: pp. 139–155.
- (2008) 'Performance and performativity: A geography of unknown lands', in J.S. Duncan, N.C. Johnson and R.H. Schein (eds) *A companion to cultural geography*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. pp. 121–136.
- Watson, B. and Harpin, J. (eds) (2011) *Identities, cultures and voices in leisure and sport* (LSA Publication, No.116). Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association.
- Wheaton, B. (2010) 'Introducing the consumption and representation of lifestyle sports', *Sport in Society* Vol. 13, No. (7/8): pp. 1057–1081.
- Wheaton, B. (ed) (2004) *Understanding lifestyle sports, consumption, identity and difference*. London: Routledge.