The Pursuit of Happiness

Stéphane Duckett

Is the pursuit of happiness a legitimate goal for psychotherapy? The answer, of course, partially depends on what you understand happiness to be. I once had a recovering heroin addict in a group session at a State-funded forensic rehab service pose the question to the group as a whole 'What is happiness?' For him happiness had been defined by the rush of the injection of his drug of choice. It was a relatively brief and fleeting experience interjected with periods of utter misery. However his life, up until this point, reflects the paradox of happiness, namely that you can be happy for the moment but more generally unhappy with your life taken as a whole and vice versa of course. This underscores the essential conceptual problem with a unitary notion of happiness.

Happiness within psychology really came to the fore post war during a time of hope and aspiration and some relative affluence. In the US kick-started by World War II, the economy turned into a giant that could well afford for an entire younger baby boom generation to experience leisure as had not been possible for their pioneering forefathers. Is it any surprise that psychologists the likes of Timothy O'Leary with his rigormortic smile found a willing audience for his hedonistic message 'tune in, turn on and drop out'? However the superficiality of their conception of happiness as a unitary psychological phenomenon had to its short life an unfortunate by-product within psychology; that is happiness as a legitimate research goal came to be viewed with a degree of suspicion. This is, of course, not

to say that some superb work on happiness over the past thirty odd years hasn't been done but its presence particularly within psychotherapy has been somewhat occluded or, at best, co-opted by lifestyle gurus. All of that more recently of course has changed somewhat with the rather cynical realisation on the part of certain high profile psychologists that as a topic happiness sells books, at least to the general public.

Where does this leave us with respect to the business of psychotherapy? I want to propose a rather different conceptualisation of happiness, which whilst crude in some respects at least renders it utilitarian. I will not define it since how we define at least the experience of happiness is subjective. I therefore will allow the reader to refer to their own states of mind, which most aptly describes your understanding of the word happiness. However what can be said is that there are various forms of happiness, some perhaps more sensual or hedonistically based and others can be said to be more cerebral such as the completion of some intellectual exercise. The truth is that even with the most sensual of activities the pleasure one derives from it is greatly enhanced within a social context. Activities are rarely, if ever, either purely cerebral or sensual. And of course the intensity of the experience varies enormously. By conceiving of the experience of happiness in this way that is on a continuum between the psyche and the soma with varying degrees of intensity we thus resolve the paradox of happiness mentioned earlier.

It is perfectly possible to be unhappy for the moment but more generally happy in the larger sense of the word and vice versa. How can this be helpful for us within psychotherapy with our own work? Let me illustrate with a specific instance that is the creative tension that can arise in later life. Edward Said is perhaps best known on the world stage for his rather controversial pronouncements on Middle Eastern politics, however within his home city of New York and amongst music lovers he is also known and well respected for his occasional writings on music and literature. Sadly he died approximately two years ago and left a perhaps, to his satisfaction, a somewhat incomplete text entitled 'On Late Style'. It has been very ably edited and pulled together into a completed posthumously published opus by his students, friends and colleagues. Within the text Said noted how for so many of our great creative minds within the Arts their last literary and musical productions are characterised not by resolution or serenity but by conflict, often with a dramatic stylistic break. Sometimes it is difficult for us to see retrospectively the extent to which this conflict may have been a revolution for its time since the product whether musical or otherwise has been gradually accepted and, in some instances, built upon by subsequent artists. Thus whilst we recognise now the late style of Beethoven as presaging the Romantics, it would have represented for its time a dramatic and significant

break away from the domination of the 18th century and Mozart in particular. Said gives other examples which might be less familiar as household names within literature such as Genet and in film Visconti. A more effective illustration within literature that he might well have given was James Joyce. Joyce's literary career is characterised by one literary hurdle after another starting with his Ibsen-influenced *Dubliners* through to *The portrait of the Artist, Ulysses* and finally *Finnegan's Wake*. It is interesting to note that his staunch supporters on each new work were most critical of subsequent pieces. Harriet Weaver, for instance, was utterly dismayed by *Finnegan's Wake,* an all together impenetrable work comprised of a dozen plus languages and accessible to the non-academician only when you absorb it as a piece of impressionistic prose poetry. The point of this all is that contrary perhaps to the rather idealised picture that Erickson paints of later productive life, many of our greatest artists have actively sought conflict, incompleteness and even in a sense, pain.

How do we explain this? One of my clients, who is a well-known author, noted and I feel, without pretension, an indifference to his completed works 'They seem without meaning'. To paraphrase him it is the process of writing that affirms life, living is an emotional engagement not dead pages held together by glue on a shelf. For this reason some artists report finding no satisfaction in falling back upon well-tried and tested performance but actively destabilise themselves in the pursuit of the contemplative life. It affirms that we are alive. Contentment in this context is not to be equated with happiness. For my author client this realisation or reframing of his discontent, lack of serenity, almost anger, is not the product of some pathological process but is a natural evolution in the contemplative life and helped to reinstate his struggling self-esteem. His ferment is a sign of continued personal growth not personal failure. The business of psychotherapy works from a deficit model. Somebody comes to you for a problem or deficit, if you will. Inherent with this model is the notion of an inadequacy on the part of the client. Said's reconceptualisation of that later life struggle however puts forward the notion that struggle may show evidence of continuing emotional development, engagement not complacency and relinquishment.

If we, however, work from a unitary notion of happiness of course we cannot see happiness as the goal of treatment. If however we are willing to see it more broadly maybe happiness as a concept does have utility for us within the business of psychotherapy.

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