

How our view of what makes us happy has changed in 80 years

May 5 2015

Our view of what makes us happy has changed markedly since 1938.

That is the conclusion of the psychologist Sandie McHugh from the University of Bolton who has recreated a famous study of happiness conducted in Bolton in 1938. She will present her study today, Tuesday 5 May 2015, to the Annual Conference of the British Psychological Society in Liverpool.

In 1938 Mass Observation placed an advertisement in the the Bolton Evening News asking readers to answer the question 'What is happiness?'. A total of 226 people sent letters in reply, and they were asked to help compile a happiness index by rating the importance of ten factors ranging from beauty to more security and religion.

In 2014 Sandie McHugh and Professor Jerome Carson repeated the Mass Observation survey by asking people from the town, via the Bolton News, to complete a questionnaire that repeated the questions from 1938 as closely as possible. She then compared the new findings with those from 1938.

Sandie McHugh found that in 1938 security, knowledge and religion were seen by participants as being the three most important aspects of happiness. In 2014 security was still in the top three, but good humour and leisure were in first and second places.

Religion, which was seen as the third most important factor in 1938, had

fallen to tenth (and bottom) place in 1938.

Another striking difference is that in 1938 the majority of people said they were happiest when they were in Bolton, but in 2014 63 per cent said they were happier away from the town.

When it comes to luck, in 1938 and in 2014, 40 per cent of people believed it was important to happiness. In 2014, 77 per cent answered "No" to the question "Do you think your happiness is directly linked to material possessions and wealth?". Although security had been highly rated in 1938, wealth by itself was not.

Sandie McHugh said: "The overall impression from the correspondence in 1938 is that [happiness](#) factors were rooted in everyday lives at home and within the community. In 2014 many comments value family and friends, with good humour and leisure time also ranked highly."

Quotations on happiness from the 1938 and 2014 surveys

"Enough money to meet everyday needs and a little for pleasure." (1938)

"Knowing that my rent is paid on time and I can afford to eat healthily." (2014)

"I would like a little home, not many possessions ... congenial and satisfying companionship, the availability of good music and books." (1938)

"Engaging in my hobbies, spending time that is free of worry ... Simple things like enjoying a nice meal or receiving care and affection." (2014)

"When I come home from the pit and see my kiddies and wife, I am happy." (1938)

"Simple things like going out for a walk.....you don't need tons of material things to be happy, you just have to be happy in the place you live and with the people around you." (2014)

More information: 'What is Happiness? Perceptions of Bolton residents in 1938 and 2014.' The British Psychological Society Annual Conference, 2015.

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