BUILDING BETTER LIVES:

NEW THINKING ON HOW SOCIAL INTERACTIONS SHAPE HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND WELL-BEING

THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF HAPPINESS

WHY WE ALL NEED SUPPORT (IN EDUCATION)

GROUP LIFE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE
The Canadian Institute for Advanced Research

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CIFAR researchers met with policy-makers, community leaders and others at a symposium which examined the complex ways in which health, happiness and well-being are shaped by social identities and interactions. The symposium in Brisbane, Australia included three members of CIFAR’s program in Social Interactions, Identity & Well-being: John Helliwell (University of British Columbia), Phil Oreopolous (University of Toronto) and Alexander Haslam (University of Queensland). They presented new research insights from their work in how social interactions and identity impact our psychology and our social and economic behavior. Attendees of the event included leaders in public policy, healthcare, social services, and academia as well as interested public.

WHY SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS MATTER

Research increasingly shows how important social identity and social interactions are to people’s sense of well-being. Factors like civic engagement, connections with family and friends, and good government have all been shown to play an important role in how satisfied people are with their lives, and can even outweigh the effect of income alone. Researchers in CIFAR’s Social Interactions, Identity & Well-Being program have helped to switch well-being focus from merely measuring wealth to looking at other issues, such as the nature of leadership, barriers to education, the welfare and happiness of children, policy issues around the economics of poverty, crime and punishment, the identity and well-being of migrants, and others.

John Helliwell — The Social Foundations of Happiness

Measurements of well-being can be used effectively to assess the progress of nations. Researchers have been measuring and comparing incomes, disease rates, and crime rates for centuries. But one aspect of life has long been neglected in these measures — happiness. Now, each year thousands of people in over 100 countries are asked: how satisfied are you with your life as a whole? The results are compiled in The World Happiness Report, giving a picture of the current state of global happiness and helping to understand our sources of happiness.

Measures of the positive emotions should be more central to research and policies promoting well-being than measures of negative emotions. We need to “measure what matters”. Positive life evaluations are shaped more strongly by the presence of positive emotions than the absence of negative ones, yet all-too-often people focus only on removing life’s ills.

We need to look beyond GDP towards social factors to explain variation in life satisfaction. Six key factors can explain three quarters of the variation in life satisfaction between countries and over time: GDP per capita, life expectancy, having someone to count on, performing generous behavior, having freedom to make life decisions, and perceptions of corruption/trust. GDP per capita isn’t the most impactful of these factors, but it is the most unequally distributed across countries. Less widely recognized are the social dimensions of life that are fundamental to happiness and life satisfaction.

“People are more honest and generous than you think they are.”
— John Helliwell

Encompassing social identities helps to support well-being by joining people together and breaking down barriers. The work of CIFAR Global Scholar Alumna Katharine Greenaway has shown that when given the same set of instructions, people build better Lego® model if the instructions were written by someone with whom they share a common identity. But when we build a superordinate identity that encompasses all participants, the differences disappear. A similar dynamic affects the happiness of immigrants to Canada. Despite coming from countries with very different
levels of life satisfaction, after immigrating, new Canadians all have roughly the same level of happiness and life satisfaction.

Our perceptions of trustworthiness in others can impact our level of happiness. Trust is an important component of happiness, but what makes people happy is how trustworthy they think others are, not how trustworthy they actually are. These two are very different: in a survey, 20 per cent of Torontonians expected a lost wallet to be returned with cash in it. But when an experimenter dropped 20 wallets, 80 per cent were returned. The world is more trustworthy than people believe, and this pessimism makes our lives less happy.

Phil Oreopoulos — Why we all need support (in education)

Decisions about education are some of the most important decisions people make, and also some of the hardest, making the need for support crucial. The costs of going to school and working hard while you’re there are immediate—schooling takes a lot of time and effort. But the benefits to hard work at school are distant and uncertain. Everyone understands that 6-year-olds don’t go to school because they’re thinking of all the benefits. In practice, most 18-year-olds headed to college or university aren’t weighing all the costs and benefits either and experience a challenging transition period.

Personal assistance can go a long way in helping overcome barriers to accessing education. In the United States, federal financial aid forms are extremely complicated to fill out. For children from schools and families where most people don’t go to university, the form is a lonely hurdle to overcome. But a lot of the information required on the financial aid form is also required for tax forms, and Oreopoulos partnered with H&R Block to randomly give some customers help filling out financial aid forms at the same time they did their taxes. Children who received help with the forms were 40% more likely to fill them out, and 24% more likely to enroll in university.

The social support-based program “Life After High School” has helped improve application and enrolment rates. Oreopoulos organized the “Life After High School” program to support youth in Ontario schools where less than half of students were going on to college or university. The schools gave up some Grade 12 class time, and “Life After High School” coordinators helped students pick programs that interested them, then helped them apply with their application fees covered. Application rates rose from 60% to 75%, and enrollment rose from 53% to 58%.

Social support extended into a student’s post-secondary education can improve academic achievement levels. Even once students get to university, many scrape by with low grades or don’t even manage that and drop out. Oreopoulos led an experiment where thousands of university students received support by text message with advice, motivation and encouragement. But a small group of students received personal coaching from an upper year undergraduate, who tried to meet them once per week and support them in any way they needed. The texts raised grades by 2 percentage points, but the coaches raised students’ grades by 7 percentage points. The personal touch made the difference of a whole letter grade. All students received advice, but only the students with a coach received social support.

“There are lots of situations where we behave by following a routine or the path of least resistance. Personal assistance can make it easier and more of a routine to get support.”

— Phil Oreopoulos

A broad spectrum of decisions made in life can greatly benefit from strong social support. It’s generally easier to stick to a habit or follow a routine than break from it, even when the expected benefits are large. One must think about the types of opportunities that exist for receiving social support, and to find their own ways of helping others and themselves through those difficult decisions in life.
Nearly everyone underestimates the importance of social factors for health. When people were surveyed and asked to rank 11 factors in terms of their importance as predictors of mortality, “social support” and “social integration” were consistently ranked last. In fact, lack of social support and lack of social integration are the two biggest predictors of mortality of the entire list, bigger than smoking or obesity. The social determinants of health are often ignored, in large part because we don’t understand how they work to support health.

Group identities are a fundamental source of mental and physical health. Humans live in groups, and a large part of a person’s self-concept derives from the social groups they belong to. Groups furnish us with a social identity, and shared identities form the basis for social processes such as trust, communication, organization and leadership. These social processes in turn provide a sense of self-esteem, belonging, purpose and resilience. Shared belonging and purpose in turn builds shared identity, creating a “virtuous circle” of social identification.

Positive social identities are often under threat, particularly during life transitions such as retirement or unemployment. Loss of social identity can create a vicious cycle, leading to disconnection and loneliness, alienation, dysfunction and vulnerability, and a further degradation of the sense of shared social identity. This “social identity theory” explains the central role of group memberships in people’s lives.

Our social identity, both within and outside the workplace, can have important health implications. One meta-analysis demonstrated that social identification predicts the absence of depression. Individuals with two meaningful group memberships were half as likely to experience depression relapses than those with no group memberships. There is also a positive correlation between social identification within the workplace and mental health. Organizations that don’t share a sense of “us-ness” literally make their workers sick. A loss of social identification can even lead to an early death. Work can provide positive group memberships, and people who lost one group membership when they retired were twice as likely to die during the following six years.

Social psychological isolation could reasonably be said to kill more Australians and Canadians — of all ages — than any other single cause.

— Alex Haslam

Building group memberships can be the cornerstone of clinical intervention. The Groups 4 Health psychological therapy teaches people how to build and maintain connections with groups of others, and use their social groups as psychological resources. In initial tests, Groups 4 Health was shown to reduce depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness, while increasing life satisfaction and self-esteem.

Investment in research on social determinants of health is critical. Social factors are major determinants of health, and essential to effective intervention. Yet present investment in research on social determinants is less than 3 per cent of overall medical research on mental health. Lack of social support is something people die from, and greater awareness of that fact is needed to spur action and investment.