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# SEMIOTICS OF HAPPINESS

RHETORICAL BEGINNINGS  
OF A PUBLIC PROBLEM

ASHLEY FRAWLEY



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# Semiotics of Happiness

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Rhetorical beginnings of a public problem

Ashley Frawley

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# Preface

One of the most intriguing developments in Western societies in the twenty-first century is the growing significance that politicians, policymakers, experts, cultural entrepreneurs and the media attach to the value of happiness. At the turn of the century, it would have been difficult to imagine that political parties and governments would be enthusing about policies promoting happiness as the big idea of our era. Yet, as Dr Ashley Frawley argues in this book, happiness is frequently represented as the truly enlightened alternative to the tired old policies of the twentieth century.

From a historical and sociological perspective, it is truly striking how the concept of happiness is rarely interrogated. Occasionally, one encounters the demand that the concept of happiness be defined or further clarified. Some have called into question the policymakers' contention that happiness can be meaningfully measured. Others have queried its technocratic and instrumental adaptation and use. However, even many of its critics implicitly accept the assumptions that lie behind the promotion of the goal of happiness. Indeed, the moral crusaders who idealize happiness rarely have to account for themselves because of its status as a taken-for-granted concept.

And, yet, as Frawley eloquently outlines, the current problematization of happiness is the outcome of social construction. What is deeply disturbing about the problematization of happiness is that it continually communicates the claim that unless certain policies and therapeutic techniques are adopted most of us are unlikely to be well. It advocates the belief that without political or therapeutic intervention we are doomed to the state of being unhappy. Thus, the sacralization of happiness is paralleled by a tendency to devalue the emotional and intellectual resources of the human subject. In a world where the problems of society are continually recast as that of individual psychological deficits, the goal of happiness acquires a redemptive character. But, redemption can only be realized through the intervention of the Expert.

The transformation of happiness – or its absence – into a social problem serves as a prelude towards promoting policies and techniques that have as their object the management of people's behaviour and emotions. In previous times, moralists of various shades took it upon themselves to teach people



how to be good. In the current era, this objective has been displaced by the objective of making us happy. Most crusades – like that promoted on behalf of happiness – have a tendency to transform themselves into a zealous, even dogmatic movement. Those who want to make all of us happy whether we like it or not believe that they are performing a public duty. But, then, so did the Controller in Huxley's *Brave New World* want us to live on a diet of 'feelies' and 'scent organs'.

The current happiness crusade may well turn out to be a relatively short-lived phenomenon. But, understanding its origins and the cultural resources that it draws on allows us to gain important insights into the nature of human alienation in our times. Through a rigorous and methodical reconstruction of the problematization of happiness, the chapters that follow explain how this new policy fetish provides a medium for evading the social problems of our time.

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*University of Kent, UK*

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## The ‘Problem’ of Happiness

In recent years, happiness has seen an exponential growth in interest across a broad range of disciplines, within the media at large, and has become a widely affirmed and oft-stated goal of public policy and state intervention. The shelves of bookshops are stocked with publications with titles such as *The How of Happiness* (Lyubomirsky, 2007), *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Haidt, 2006), *Hardwiring Happiness* (Hanson, 2013) and *The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes It Hard to be Happy* (Foley, 2010). Governments around the world are considering measures of ‘subjective well-being’ as indicators of progress and tools for appraising policy (Stiglitz et al., 2009; Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012; Helliwell et al., 2013; Parliament Office of Science and Technology, 2012; Deeming, 2013). This fascination is fed by a seemingly constant stream of academic publishing on the topic, from the ‘economics of happiness’ to the sub-discipline of ‘positive psychology’ announced in 1999, and even the founding of several dedicated journals including the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *The International Journal of Happiness and Development* and the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Although it would seem that the rising interest in happiness represents a shift towards focusing on the ‘brighter side’ of the human condition, it is clear that these discussions are not simply a celebration of human health and well-being. As early as 2004, newspaper headlines began to proclaim the existence of an ‘epidemic of unhappiness’ (Ahuja, *The Times*: 2004; Leith, *The Telegraph*: 2004; Laurance, *The Independent*: 2005; Griffiths, *The Sunday Times*: 2007), and that unhappiness is ‘Britain’s worst social problem’ (Laurance, *The Independent*: 2005). It was not long before the speeches of politicians and public figures, like David Cameron, who for example proclaimed that ‘we have the unhappiest children in the developed world’ (Cameron, 2007), became littered with a new concern for happiness. That such discussions were not a passing fad is evidenced

by the fact that, relatively quickly, policymakers began to not simply affirm, but act upon happiness claims. Some of the more prominent results in the United Kingdom have been the introduction in 2010 of an Office of National Statistics (ONS) initiative to measure and track happiness, or ‘subjective well-being’, and the founding of a Cabinet Office ‘Behavioural Insights Team’ in 2010 heavily influenced by American academics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, whose influential 2008 publication *Nudge* advocated ‘nudging’ people towards decisions more conducive to ‘health, wealth and happiness’.

Emerging from these developments is the conclusion that happiness has become a serious problem faced by Western societies – indeed, the world – that we would ignore only at our individual and collective peril. People are miserable, stressed, depressed or simply not as happy as they could be. They are amateurs, going about pursuing happiness in all the wrong ways, proponents of ‘happiness science’ proclaim. Even when happiness is not explicitly set forth as a problem, a cursory glance at the news, academic studies and outputs of countless think tanks in recent years would lead anyone to the conclusion that many, if not all, of the world’s problems can be solved by reorienting the beliefs, desires and goals of individuals, even entire nations, to the true meaning of happiness and how best to pursue it. Backed by prolific scientific research, it seems that the key to happiness may finally lie within the grasp of humanity. Richard Layard, a prominent advocate of happiness science, has asserted:

We want our rulers to make the world better by their actions, and we want to do the same ourselves. [...] So it is time to reassert the noble philosophy of the Enlightenment. In this view, every human being wants to be happy, and everybody counts equally. It follows that progress is measured by the overall scale of human happiness and misery. And the right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness in the world and (especially) the least misery. I can think of no nobler ideal. (Layard, *The Guardian*: 2009)

Amid such inspirational and stirring rhetoric, it is difficult to imagine how or why one might question or oppose activities designed to increase happiness guided by the empirically tested results of happiness research. Indeed, as this study of its usage in public discourses will show, this is part of the reason why it has become so popular.

While the sheer growth in output on the subject seems to speak to an objective need, a ‘thirst for knowledge’ on the part of society as a whole, for new information about happiness, I want to suggest that there are more complex forces at play. Instead of taking for granted the importance of the issue, this book

asks how and why the semiotics of happiness became an appealing and plausible means of communicating an increasing array of social issues. Its primary focus is not on happiness as an abstract unchanging object that, once discovered, can be revealed for all people and all times, but rather as a set of clearly identifiable and consistently repeated claims about the nature of individuals and the world, and how both should be understood and even fundamentally changed. It is this 'clearly identifiable and consistently repeated set of claims' for which 'happiness' is the dominant (though not only) signifier that forms the focus of the chapters that follow.

Although the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of authors, researchers, journalists and other dedicated proponents of happiness science may believe they are simply propounding evidence-based facts on the nature of happiness and how life ought to be lived, I argue that they are actually holding up a mirror before their own culture. Reflected back are the preoccupations, meanderings and shifting beliefs about the nature of human beings and their relationships to each other and the world particular to a given culture at a given time. A sign, as it goes, is anything that refers to something else. If we peel back the layers of denotation and connotation, I argue that 'happiness' as a public problem is not a signifier of a desire to improve or optimize underlying mental states, nor is it even about these mental states at all. Rather, as I hope to show, it is implicitly a critique of change. It expresses a fear of the future articulated through a series of paradoxes that purport to describe the true nature of happiness and progress, but which really express a deep-seated uncertainty about the future and consequent desire to maintain the present. It should be noted that although the insights generated here may be applicable to many Anglo-American societies, the case described in most detail is the contemporary culture of UK society and the diffusion and development of happiness discourses there.

In order to grasp the significance now accorded to happiness in public debate, it is necessary to step back and critically examine its existence as a social, rather than solely natural or empirical, phenomenon. This book examines how the semiotics of happiness in public discourses have shifted to comprise a distinctly problematized orientation. It offers an alternative account of the rise of happiness to the forefront of public debate through an analysis of the signifying practices of its advocates, or 'claims-makers', an elucidation of the core claims that characterize the issue and the rhetoric used in its promotion. To do so, I take as my starting point discussions about happiness in major UK newspapers, chosen not only for their historical value, but also because they are an institution

of daily life that specializes in ‘orchestrating everyday consciousness’, where social meanings are created and contested, reality is ‘certified’ as reality and where such certifications define and delimit the terms of effective opposition (Gitlin, 2003: 2). Even as these decline, their significance for defining the most serious problems of the day remains, if certainly not for every member of the general public, at least for policymakers. Through a close analysis of the most frequently repeated claims during the most important periods on the path to the institutionalization of the problem, I attempt to show how discourses that speak in the language of universals may be thought of as historically contingent, and more specifically, how an apparently positive focus on human strengths nonetheless affirms a morality of low expectations and implicitly underscores prevailing cultural assumptions of the diminished individual.

### Why ‘happiness’?

Given the array of semiotic resources drawn upon in public and academic debates including happiness, well-being, eudaimonia and flourishing, it may be necessary from the outset to stipulate precisely why happiness was chosen as the main focus. First, happiness was the main ‘sign vehicle’ through which claims about the existence of a new social problem initially made their way onto the public stage. To this day, it maintains its popular resonance, even as many advocates attempt to distance themselves from it. Second, there is no consensus or standardized set of signifiers, and although discussions in public arenas do often attempt to fix their meanings in various ways, they continue to be used interchangeably with the same definitions frequently applied to different words. Nor is there any single agreed upon ‘scientific’ definition, but rather certain terminologies and attempts to define are suffused with particular rhetorical offerings as well as their own sets of shortcomings. Finally, although associated signifiers were also investigated, happiness was chosen as the primary keyword to investigate in order to focus the analysis on its development and change over time. While new words appear and reflect shifting emphases and meanings, the core features of the ‘problematization’ described throughout this book are nonetheless retained. For the sake of simplicity, happiness is the predominant term used throughout, but it might be more accurate to consider this work as an examination of the problematization of happiness and its associated vocabularies. These issues and the core features of the problem are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

## Two approaches to social problems

The wealth of literature on happiness produced over the last decade alone reveals that there are many ways that one might go about studying the phenomenon. But, what is of primary interest here is neither happiness in the abstract, nor its deeper, 'true' or philosophical meanings, nor its uses or pursuits in the everyday lives of lay individuals. Rather, the focus is upon the *problematization* of happiness – that is the rise and subsequent success of claims that have asserted that happiness constitutes a serious problem for society, that individuals and governments have been mistaken in their pursuits either of happiness or other goals and that these and a host of related problems can be ameliorated through harmoniously attuning activities and policies to the findings of happiness science.

Approaching happiness as a social problem can proceed from two perspectives. The first could be considered an 'objectivist' or 'realist' orientation and reflects the vast majority of research and claims about happiness flooding university lecture halls and newspaper column inches. In general, such an approach attempts to describe social problems as objectively troubling conditions and offers explanations for how and why they occur. By contrast, a more 'subjectivist' or 'interpretive' (also called constructionist) approach examines how some conditions come to be conceived of as social problems and accounts for how they are constructed or 'put together'. These approaches are not monolithic and may vary greatly in terms of their levels of analysis and sociological outlook. Constructionist perspectives can differ significantly in terms of their underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions, while realist perspectives range in focus from the individual biological, or even genetic, level, to the micro, meso and macro social levels. An overview of these two perspectives is given below in order to highlight not only the distinct offerings of an interpretivist point of view, but also to give some insight into the underlying assumptions implicit in mainstream discussions of happiness as a social problem towards the present.

### **The objectivist approach**

Superficially, the meaning of the term 'social problem' seems self-evident; they are simply harmful conditions that affect society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 150). In everyday life, people are confronted with a wealth of information about new social problems, their causes and potential solutions. Conditions such

as crime, poverty, racism and overpopulation seem to pose serious threats to society, regardless of what people may know or think about them (Best, 2004: 14–15). Such an understanding reflects an objectivist orientation, which has been the historically dominant approach to the study of social problems and which remains among the most popular means of organizing the teaching of social problems in introductory courses and textbooks on the subject (Mauss, 1992: 1916–1921; Best, 2004: 15; Best, 2008: 4).<sup>1</sup> It is also the dominant way with which information is presented in the mass media whose ubiquity provides a potentially endless loop of information about troubling conditions. Taking the existence of the problem as its starting point, objectivist approaches are typically concerned with uncovering, explaining and providing solutions to social problems (Clarke, 2001: 4).

Although this approach takes many forms in practice and encompasses many different and even conflicting theoretical orientations, Loseke (2003a: 164–165) suggests that they share a number of commonalities. In addition to taking the examination of objectively harmful conditions as their starting point, they also tend to hold particular ideas about what sorts of conditions are intolerable and what causes them (Loseke, 2003a: 164). For example, a definition of social problems stemming from a conflict perspective states: ‘The distribution of power in society is the key to understanding these social problems. The powerless, because they are dominated by the powerful, are likely to be thwarted in achieving their basic needs (sustenance, security, self-esteem, and productivity). In contrast, the interests of the powerful are served’ (Eitzen et al., 2012: 12). Visions of the social world embedded in such views can range from individual biological, psychological or genetic causes of deviance to sources of conflict in micro-social group interactions (peers, family), meso-social subcultures, geographic localities or social institutions and finally, large-scale macro-social causes such as socio-economic divisions, oppression and domination (Clarke, 2001: 5–6). Finally, many people who approach the study of social phenomena as objectively problematic may present themselves as ‘experts’, offering an image of how the world should work and ‘prognostic frames’ for how troublesome conditions and behaviours should be changed (Loseke, 2003a: 165).

### ***From social pathology to the pathological society***

A sense of continuity among disparate realist approaches to social problems is evident when one considers the historical development of their study. While discovering social problems and campaigning to bring about their solutions may



seem a timeless human pursuit, the idea that some problems are not natural, if unfortunate, parts of life to be endured, but rather problems resolvable through the rational application of human reason, has relatively recent origins.

Impressed by the accomplishments of the Enlightenment, nineteenth-century social reformers sought to apply the scientific approach to the problems of society, modelling the practice of sociology after developments in the natural sciences (Clarke, 2001: 4; Rubington and Weinberg, 2003: 15). Early social theorists rooted their analyses in visions of society as a biological organism, its problems representing impediments to the proper functioning of the whole. Spencer famously ruminated upon the complex structures of the body politic – from the ‘excess of nutrition over waste’ in the circulatory system (profit and commodity circulation) to the ‘balancing’ centre of the brain (parliament) (Spencer, 1891: 290, 303). From this perspective, defective arrangements or individuals were seen as degradations, degenerations or ‘pathologies’ afflicting the otherwise healthy social body. Thus, an early textbook informed students, ‘Defect is an incident of evolution’ and that the ‘biologist prepares part of the data for sociology’ (Henderson, 1901: 12). Later, social pathologists would locate the causes of social problems in incorrect or ineffective socialization and the inculcation of erroneous values. As Rubington and Weinberg (2003: 18) describe, ‘In this perspective’s “tender” mood, the people who contribute to the social problem are viewed as “sick”; in its tough mood, they are viewed as “criminal”’.

Declining as a theoretical approach to social problems towards mid-century, the vestiges of social pathology can nonetheless be discerned in contemporary objectivist accounts of social problems in the mass media and, as Jamrozik and Nocella (1998: 18) assert, in the ‘field[s] of social control’ – public policy, administration and ‘service delivery apparatus’ which maintain a tendency to explain deviance and non-compliance in social psychological, biological and behavioural terms. As we shall see throughout this book, it is conceptualizations such as these that dominate objectivist accounts of happiness as a social problem. However, while the classical notion of society as a healthy organism underlying early objectivist accounts may have fallen out of favour, its underlying assumptions have not so much perished as they have been transformed.

Early treatments of social problems came under criticism for what Mills (1943: 166, 179) characterized as lacking any ‘level of abstraction to knit them together’ and as essentially ‘propaganda for conformity to those norms and traits ideally associated with small-town, middle-class milieux’. Yet, the guiding ideal of such conceptualizations had nonetheless been a progressive notion of society as evolving towards greater rationality and freedom. The Enlightenment had

given the initially religious notion of a linear ascent to a 'utopian endpoint' a finally secular form and 'the ethos of perfectionism became inseparable from the claims of reason' (Alexander, 1990: 16). Theorists saw social problems as obstacles to the 'forward march of progress' (albeit towards what amounted to fairly narrowly defined interests) that could be rationally understood and rooted out (Rubington and Weinberg, 2003: 16–17). However, the twentieth century saw fundamental challenges and ultimately changes to this underlying ethos so that '[t]he very possibility that there is a higher point, an "end" towards which society should strive, has come to be thrown into doubt' (Alexander, 1990: 16, 26). The 1960s' counterculture began to see society itself as 'sick', and analyses of problems began to locate the causes of pathology in society rather than the individual. As Rubington and Weinberg (2003: 19) describe, contemporary approaches are 'indignant about the defects of society and are less optimistic in their prognosis. The most indignant see societal pathology as total, spreading, and likely to dehumanize the entire population.'

Thus, there is a sense of reversal in which problematic conditions and people once thought of as pathological outgrowths of an otherwise healthy social order are now seen as potentially 'infected' by a sick or 'pathological' society. Writing on contemporary health promotion, Lupton (1995: 48) describes how public health debates frequently represent the individual as 'distinct from the social' and society as 'having the potential of intruding into the individual'. Social problems are increasingly expressed through the language of health and illness, with ill-health conceptualized as 'a symptom of the pathology of civilization' and a 'sign that modern life is inherently damaging to health' (Lupton, 1995: 51). Like the approaches of the past which placed a high degree of importance on the individual deviant as bearing responsibility for non-conformity, and in spite of the ostensible indictment of social structures, more recent approaches also tend to place the individual at the heart of discussions of social problems. According to Rubington and Weinberg (2003: 19):

The recent variant [of social pathology], which tends to regard the society rather than its non-conforming members as 'sick', has its roots in the Rousseauian view of human nature. Individuals are good; their institutions, on the other hand, are bad. Yet, even the modern pathologists see the remedy to 'sick' institutions as a change in people's values. Thus, according to this perspective, the only real solution to social problems is moral education.

However, it may be more accurate to say that rather than goodness, the defining characteristic of the human in such conceptualizations has become *vulnerability*.

Cultural narratives underpinning discussions of social problems towards the present implicitly underscore a notion of the human being as vulnerable to social contagion, both from the pressures and stresses of the external world and from the influences of others, in need of constant therapeutic help and guidance. Gradually, a shift has occurred from earlier narratives which emphasized qualities such as rationality or resilience towards a narrative of vulnerability in the early twenty-first century (Furedi, 2007: 235). As Pupavac (2001: 360) observes, 'The 19th-century archetype of the robust risk-taking, self-made man is the antithesis of the risk-averse 21st century's exemplar of the vulnerable victim whose actions and environment are to be governed by the precautionary principle.'

In a study conducted by Frankenberg et al. (2000), attempting to investigate how childhood illness and injury were experienced and managed by, as the authors initially assumed, the small numbers of children affected by them as compared to unaffected children, the authors quickly learned that such a distinction would not be possible. Rather, not only were all children encountered in their ethnography seen as vulnerable, but also the adults involved appeared to consider themselves and others as vulnerable as well. Yet, for the authors, the notion of vulnerability was difficult to pin down, appearing not as a particular identifiable phenomenon the same in all contexts, nor as an 'embedded' or 'embodied' characteristic of particular children, but rather as a free floating social category (Frankenberg et al., 2000: 591–592). As the authors put it:

It is social either to the extent that whole categories of particular individuals, such as children, are considered by definition to be self-evident candidates for incorporation into such a status; or it is social to the extent that the degree of vulnerability of individual children is considered to be precipitated by and through the actions of others, usually, adults, whose malevolence, ignorance, or failure to protect and nurture (indeed whose own vulnerability) has brought about the vulnerability of the child. (Frankenberg et al., 2000: 589, emphasis removed)

Thus, the concept of vulnerability works as a cultural metaphor, a resource drawn upon by a range of parties to characterize individuals and groups and to describe an increasingly diverse array of human experience (Furedi, 2005: 77). According to Frankenberg et al., vulnerability connotes:

[...] a lack of realistic agency based on a misunderstanding, or more accurately complete lack of understanding of harmful settings, and situations, that finally appears to demand benevolent others to provide a protective cordon sanitaire within which the damaging effects of the vulnerability can be contained. In brief,

in this framework, vulnerability appears through the demonstration of a lack of worldliness and the possession of an indiscriminating and individual naiveté in conducting the tough business of life. (2000: 589)

It is a view of the human condition that emphasizes fragility and ‘casts serious doubt about the capacity of the self to manage new challenges and to cope with adversity’ (Furedi, 2005: 76). ‘As a cultural metaphor, vulnerability is used to highlight the claim that people and their communities lack the emotional and psychological resources necessary to deal with change and make choices’ (Furedi, 2005: 76).

It is also a potentially powerful rhetorical weapon in campaigns about new social problems, acting as a ‘substantial goad to very particular forms of social and political action’ (Frankenberg et al., 2000: 591). Best (1999) describes how since the 1960s there has been an increasing emphasis upon victimization in claims about new social problems. After its introduction in the early 1970s, the ‘catchy’ rhetoric of ‘blaming the victim’ quickly caught on as a means of characterizing not just the underclass victims of unjust social structures, but an increasingly broad array of people. Through an emphasis upon the suffering of victims – ‘vulnerable, respectable innocents, exploited by more powerful, deviant strangers’ – concern for new social problems crossed traditional political boundaries (Best, 1999: 98). According to Best (1999: 99): ‘Part of its appeal may have been its ambiguity; it let one identify victims without necessarily blaming the villains’.

While characterizing problems in this way may be a successful means of turning the public eye towards any number of claimed injustices, such conceptualizations can have somewhat dubious effects. For instance, Wainwright (2008: 88–89) has observed that the identity of ‘work stress victim’, though viewed by some as a ‘critique of capitalist production relations and an imperative towards job redesign’, has in practice produced a ‘minimal and therapeutic’ response from employers, ‘comprising, for example, the introduction of stress management and counselling interventions, rather than radical changes in job control or demands’.

Another upshot of this turn towards focusing on the vulnerability of victims of a pathological society has been a tendency away from viewing human beings as autonomous rational subjects able to overcome problems through the power of reason. As Pupavac (2001: 360) observes, ‘The idea of [the] autonomous rational subject is viewed as unrepresentative of the majority of the world’s population.’ For example, in David Brooks’ (2011) bestseller, *The Social Animal*, the author details the disappointments of the previous century’s attempts to deal

with social problems, from the inability to control the boom and bust cycles of capitalism to educational underachievement, and concludes that the roots of these failures lie in an over-reliance upon human reason. By contrast, Brooks suggests that more emphasis must be placed on integrating knowledge about the power of unconscious drives, how 'genes shape individual lives, how brain chemistry works in particular cases, how family structure and cultural patterns can influence development in specific terms' with the goal of achieving 'human flourishing' and a different sort of 'success story' that emphasizes not material gain, but 'the role of the inner mind' (Brooks, 2011: x-xvi). How problems are conceptualized also influences how their solutions are broached. It is little surprising that in accounts such as this, while singling out social structures as 'villains', proposals for change tend to be disproportionately focused upon the individual life and mind.

The widespread acceptance of a vulnerability model of the human being and a focus on victims are a corollary of the decline of beliefs about the perfectibility of society and the rise of an ethos of 'no alternative'. One of the central arguments of this book is that these general trends in conceptualizations of social ills reverberate throughout realist accounts of happiness as a social problem, focusing upon the vulnerability and susceptibility of individuals and groups to the negative influences of pathological institutions and social structures. Yet, the possibility of one day changing these social structures in real, material ways is subtly dismissed in favour of shifting attention to the behaviours, beliefs and inner subjectivity of individuals in the here and now.

### **The subjectivist approach**

The ideas detailed thus far form the point of departure for the ensuing analysis, with realist accounts of happiness as a social problem considered hereafter as 'claims' made by 'claims-makers' that furnish the data for analysis. In so doing, I take a decidedly more 'subjectivist' orientation to the study of social ills. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the notion that social problems can be solved through the rational application of human reason, shifting conceptualizations and emphases on particular types of knowledge have tended to produce the opposite effect: a static vision of society and human potential. As the ensuing chapters aim to show, treatments of happiness as an objective phenomenon with objectively identifiable determinants, liable to be fostered or damaged by a range of variables apart from our conceptualizations thereof, are problematic because they threaten to disregard the crucial role of subjectivity

in mediating external reality and physiological response. Moreover, a more subjectivist orientation draws attention to the crucial role of human actors in defining conditions as problematic and bringing these problem claims to the attention of others. The means by which this is done, that it is done at all, and the success of such claims are important indicators of a culture hospitable to framing social problems through the individualized language of emotion.

The subjectivist approach to social problems initially arose out of a dissatisfaction with some of the shortcomings of earlier objectivist accounts. Objectivist understandings faced at least three challenges. First, numerous diverse issues are often grouped together under the label of 'social problems' with little uniting them at the level of theoretical abstraction. Second, ideas of social problems have changed over time and few attempts had been made to account for the fact that conditions deemed acceptable or which went altogether unnoticed in different times and places could become serious issues at others. Finally, while investigations of problematic conditions are seemingly inexhaustible, the concept of the 'social problem' in and of itself had generated little in the way of general theory (Best, 2004: 15–16). Becker's objections in the early 1960s to sociological explanations that define 'deviance as the infraction of some agreed-upon rule' and which proceed to 'ask who breaks the rules, and to search for the factors in their personalities, and life situations that might account for the infractions' (1963: 8) encapsulates many objections raised at the time. As Becker famously claimed, deviance is not universal but subjective: 'The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label' (1963: 9).

This definitional approach to social problems can be traced broadly to the pragmatism of George Herbert Mead and his notion that human reality is the product of social interaction. According to Mead, 'the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings' (1982: 5). For Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, one of the central tenets of this, the symbolic interactionist perspective, is that, 'As human beings we act singly, collectively, and societally on the basis of the meanings which things have for us' (1956: 686). Indeed, it was Blumer who first identified the need for a sociological approach to social problems that would not search simply for their causes and solutions in the objective world, but instead 'study the process by which society comes to see, to define, and to handle their social problems' (1971: 300–301).

But, the first systematic articulation of a sociology of social problems did not come until several years later with Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse's ([1977]2001) *Constructing Social Problems*. For Spector and Kitsuse, social

problems are not necessarily objective phenomena that have become so pressing that society has been forced to respond. Rather, they are fundamentally *activities* forming a process of social interaction. They are the products of the concerted efforts of individuals who actively group together disparate phenomena, characterize them as belonging to a particular type of problem and attempt to bring that problem to the attention of others (Spector and Kitsuse, 2001: 75–78). These activities are what constitute a public problem as a social reality. To say a problem is 'constructed' is therefore to allude to the indispensable role of human interactions in the construction process – a process made visible, and thus amenable to study, through the remnants of communication it leaves behind.

It is clear that social problems, thus conceived, possess considerable semiotic dimensions. They are forms of human expression, representational and meaning-making activities played out in words, images and symbols. As Gusfield's (1981: 3) semiotic and symbolic analysis of the drink-driving problem contends:

Human problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced, into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events. All situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets for public action. Neither are they given the same meanings at all times and by all peoples.

Eco's (1984: 15) remark that 'any natural event can be a sign' reminds that even the most seemingly straightforward of phenomena, from earthquakes to volcanic eruptions, do not present themselves to human consciousness in pre-packaged form. Whether such events are due to chance, divine retribution or human complicity depends upon the dominant codes existing in a particular interpretive community. 'The understanding of signs is not a mere matter of recognition (of a stable equivalence); it is a matter of interpretation' (Eco, 1984: 43).

Moreover, as Gusfield alludes above, the semiotic resources drawn upon to understand and convey social problems vary over time. Not only do their relative prominence in public debate and causal and explanatory power shift over time, but the conventional bonds between signifiers and signifieds shift as well. According to Halliday (1978: 192), semiotic resources have no universal, true meaning, but only a 'meaning potential' that is never truly fixed. This semiotic potential is constituted by past and present uses, but there is also latent meaning potential that exists in as yet unrealized form. Aspects of this potential are realized as these resources are drawn into the realm of social communication and pressed into action on the basis of the needs and interests of their users (van

Leeuwen, 2005: 4). However, this does not imply that the meanings attributed to a particular semiotic resource are entirely open. Cultures do not utilize the 'full range of all possible terms in giving meaning to events' (Gusfield, 1989: 16), nor do they employ the full range of potentials imaginable for a given signifier. What is more, in 'social life people constantly try to fix and control the use of semiotic resources' and to 'justify the rules they make up' (van Leeuwen, 2005: 5).

These activities, which, following Kitsuse and Spector's (1975: 593) initial recommendation for the focus of an interpretive sociology of social problems, I refer to as 'claims-making,' are integral to understanding the development of new social problems. The success of a social problem greatly depends upon the activities of claims-makers, their roles in society, connections amongst each other, dedication to the issue and familiarity and aptitude with the dominant codes of their respective interpretive communities. This approach, detailed more thoroughly in Chapters 3 and 4, brings forth different questions from those which take the existence of a problem of happiness in society as their starting point and proceed to describe its scope, causes and solutions. Instead, it endeavours to critically examine the activities of others who have already done so with tremendous success in various spheres of public debate. Thus, it asks not why society suddenly became unhappy, but rather why it suddenly became appealing to conceptualize the problems of society in the language of happiness and unhappiness.

The key benefit of a subjectivist orientation to social problems is that it calls into question the inevitability of conceptualizing the world, and by implication human beings, in certain socially prescribed and taken-for-granted ways. As mentioned in the previous section, every social problem construction involves an attendant construction of the human subject. The present emphasis upon the human subject as one that 'characteristically suffers from emotional deficit' and 'possesses a permanent consciousness of vulnerability' (Furedi, 2004: 21) tends to posit a diminished, determined subject. It is a vision of the human whose 'representative anecdote', to use a phrase of Kenneth Burke, is that of a 'passive and predetermined response to stimuli' (Gusfield, 1989: 9). A cursory glance at the happiness indices and research emphases on uncovering the 'social determinants of subjective well-being' reveals a portrayal of human emotions as a series of straightforward, unmediated responses. The idea that emotions can be 'determined', even socially, forgets that between stimulus and response lies the sign. As Burke pointed out, 'stimuli do not possess an absolute meaning. [...] Any given situation derives its character from the entire framework by which we judge it' (Burke, 1984: 35).