

In Pursuit of Unhappiness

By Darrin M. McMahon

New York Times, December 29, 2005

- 1 "HAPPY New Year!" We seldom think of those words as an order. But in some respects that is what they are.
- 2 Doesn't every American want to be happy? And don't most Americans yearn, deep down, to be happy all of the time? The right laid out in our nation's Declaration of Independence - to pursue happiness to our hearts' content - is nowhere on better display than in the rites of the holiday season. With glad tidings and good cheer, we seek to bring one year to its natural happy conclusion, while preparing to usher in a happy new year and many happy returns.
- 3 Like the cycle of the seasons, our emphasis on mirth may seem timeless, as though human beings have always made merry from beginning to end. But in fact this preoccupation with perpetual happiness is relatively recent. As Thomas Carlyle observed in 1843, "Happiness our being's end and aim' is at bottom, if we will count well, not yet two centuries old in the world."
- 4 Carlyle's arithmetic was essentially sound, for changes in both religious and secular culture since the 17th century made "happiness," in the form of pleasure or good feeling, not only morally acceptable but commendable in and of itself. While many discounted religious notions that consigned life in this world to misery and sin, others discovered signs of God's providence in earthly satisfaction. The result was at once to weaken and transpose the ideal of heavenly felicity, in effect bringing it to earth. Suffering was not our natural state. Happy was the way we were meant to be.
- 5 That shift was monumental, and its implications far reaching. Among other things, it was behind the transformation of the holiday season from a time of pious remembrance into one of unadulterated bliss. Yet the effects were greater than that. As Carlyle complained, "Every pitifulest whipster that walks within a skin has had his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be, 'happy.'"
- 6 Carlyle was notoriously cranky, but his central insight - that the new doctrine of happiness tended to raise expectations that could never possibly be fulfilled - remains as relevant today as it was in 1843. Despite enjoying far better living standards and more avenues for pleasure than before, human beings are arguably no happier now than they've ever been.
- 7 Sociologists like to point out that the percentage of those describing themselves as "happy" or "very happy" has remained virtually unchanged in Europe and the United States since such surveys were first conducted in the 1950's. And yet, this January, like last year and next, the self-help industry will pour forth books promising to make us happier than we are today. The very demand for such books is a strong indication that they aren't working.

- 8 Should that be a cause for concern? Some critics say it is. For example, economists like Lord Richard Layard and Daniel Kahneman have argued that the apparent stagnancy of happiness in modern societies should prompt policymakers to shift their priorities from the creation of wealth to the creation of good feelings, from boosting gross national product to increasing gross national happiness.
- 9 But before we take such steps, we might do well to reflect on the darker side of holiday cheer: those mysterious blues that are apt to set in while the streamers stream and the corks pop; the little voice that even in the best of souls is sometimes moved to say, "Bah, humbug." As Carlyle put it, "The prophets preach to us, 'Thou shalt be happy; thou shalt love pleasant things.' " But as he well knew, the very commandment tended to undermine its fulfillment, even to make us sad.
- 10 Carlyle's sometime friend and long-time rival, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, came to a similar conclusion. His words are all the more worth heeding in that Mill himself was a determined proponent of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. "Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so," Mill concluded after recovering from a serious bout of depression. Rather than resign himself to gloom, however, Mill vowed instead to look for happiness in another way.
- 11 "Those only are happy," he came to believe, "who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way." For our own culture, steeped as it is in the relentless pursuit of personal pleasure and endless cheer, that message is worth heeding.
- 12 So in these last days of 2005 I say to you, "Don't have a happy new year!" Have dinner with your family or walk in the park with friends. If you're so inclined, put in some good hours at the office or at your favorite charity, temple or church. Work on your jump shot or your child's model trains. With luck, you'll find happiness by the by. If not, your time won't be wasted. You may even bring a little joy to the world.

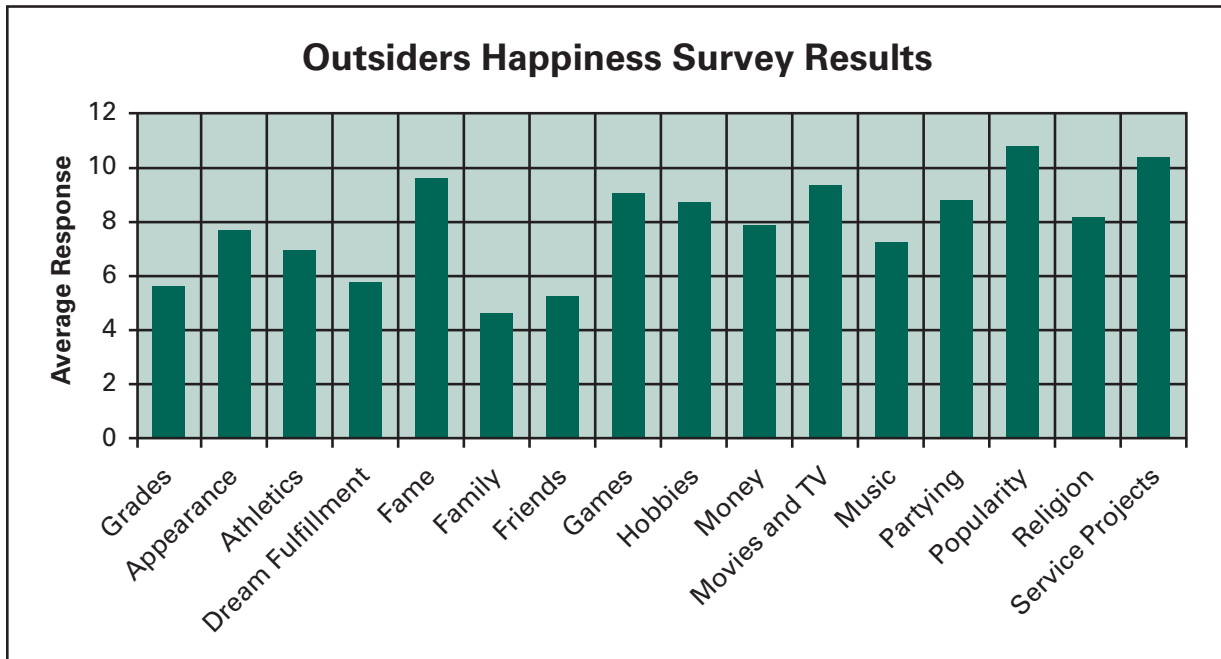
Darrin M. McMahon, a professor of history at Florida State, is the author of the forthcoming "Happiness: A History."

Youth Outside of the Church Results

Center for Youth Studies

Happiness Survey Results: A total of 66 youth (35 Males and 31 Females), aged 11-19, were surveyed using questionnaires. Youth were asked to rate 16 (sixteen) items on a scale of 1 to 16, 1 being that which makes, or would make, them most happy and 16 being that which makes them least happy.

The following graph indicates the average results for each item:



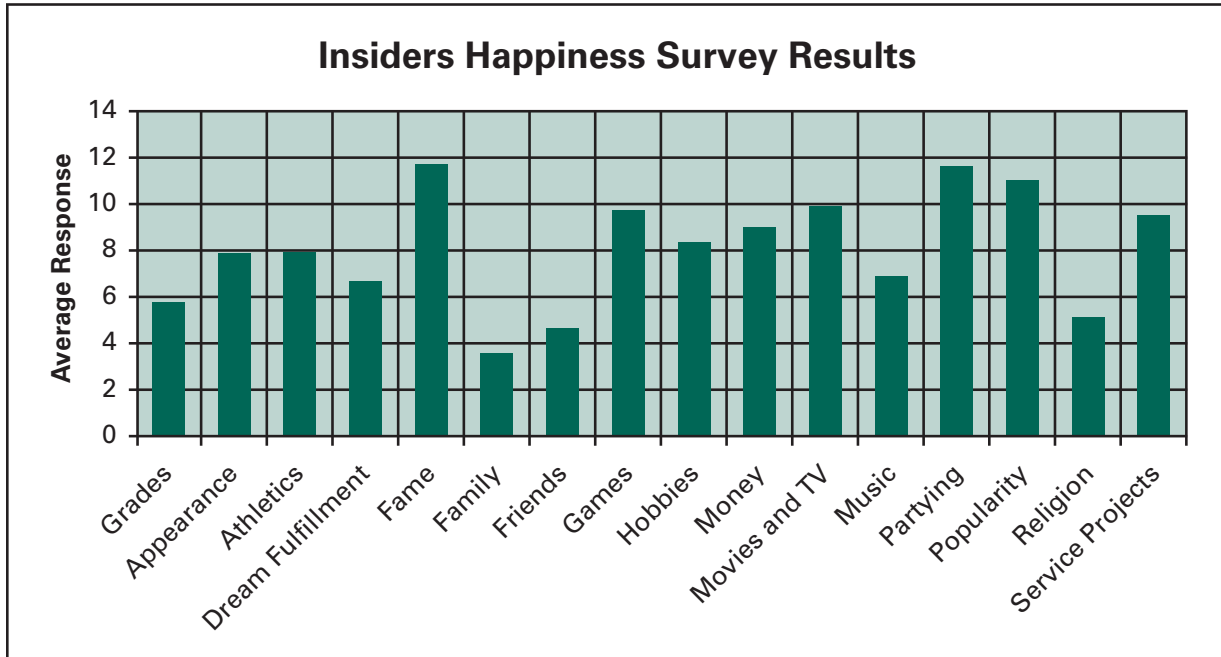
Overall, youth indicated that family (with an average response of 4.70) made them most happy, while popularity (average response of 10.80) made them least happy. Friends (average of 5.35) and grades (average of 5.67) were the second and third most influential.

Youth Inside of the Church Results

Center for Youth Studies

Happiness Survey Results: A total of 109 youth (53 Males and 56 Females), aged 11-19, were surveyed using questionnaires administered in groups. Youth were asked to rate 16 (sixteen) items on a scale of 1 to 16, 1 being that which makes, or would make, them most happy and 16 being that which makes them least happy.

The following graph indicates the average results for each item:



Overall, youth indicated that family (with an average response of 3.56) made them most happy, while fame (average response of 11.75) made them least happy. Friends (average of 4.69) and religion (average of 5.14) were the second and third most influential.