



Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice: An Interview with Houssam Elokda

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Abstract: In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or with those who research and practise across various domains that are relevant to it, whether it is in education, culture, urban planning or policy design. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Egyptian Houssam Elokda, MidEast lead with the Happy City organization, which strives to inspire builders, urban planners, and community stakeholders to build and organize for greater wellbeing.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية من أولئك الذين يعملون على دفع المعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو مع أولئك الذين يبحثون والممارسة عبر مختلف المجالات ذات الصلة به، سواء كان ذلك في التعليم والثقافة والتخطيط الحضري أو تصميم السياسات. نكتشف أفكارهم حول الوضع الحالي للمعرفة وكذلك عن الفرص والصعوبات الموجودة. هنا، نناقش مع المصري حسام العقدة، الجهود المبذولة لإلهام بناء ومخططي المناطق الحضرية، وأصحاب المصلحة في المجتمع للبناء والتنظيم من أجل المزيد من الرفاهية.

Keywords: wellbeing; urban planning; design; cities; happiness; urban health; research

About the Author: Houssam Elokda, Egyptian, is the Middle East project lead for urban experiments, research and master planning. His collaborative urban experiments and urban systems innovation makes use of neuroscience to inform public space design, with this research helping clients use urban design more effectively to maximize urban health and happiness. Houssam also co-founded *Transport for Cairo*, which pioneered crowd-sourced tools to map the city's huge transportation network. Houssam received his Master's degree in City Planning and Regeneration from the University of Glasgow in Scotland, where his work won recognition from the Royal Town Planning Institute and Scottish Head of Placemaking and Housing.

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MEJPP: You work in what is an exciting new field that positive psychology is just starting to discover but that urban planners and other like-minded professionals have been talking about for ages. What is this movement about, what work does it involve, and by whom exactly?



HE: The Happy City movement aims to empower city builders around the world with the tools and knowledge to build happier and healthier cities. Happiness should really be the ultimate goal of any society. The academic world has made significant advances in measuring and understanding the different components of subjective wellbeing (the proper academic term for happiness). We are trying to shine a lens on how the learnings from this academic field intersect with urban design. Consequently, we are putting happiness as the overarching goal of all our work on urban plans or policies. The movement involves city builders of all kinds: developers, municipalities, and federal governments, are examples of our typical clients. We try to show them that happiness is not an elusive concept, but something that we can measure, study and improve upon. More than that, we try to show them that the happy city can also be the green city, the healthy city and the economically thriving city.

MEJPP: Practically speaking, most people do not consider that buildings, the built environment, or even cities contribute to happiness and wellbeing, and yet, we can all recall moments of sitting in traffic feeling pretty hostile towards fellow city-dwellers! What are examples, especially in the Middle East region, of where the built environment contributes to individuals feeling negatively? In contrast, what is involved in the design of a “happy” city?

HE: Your example is spot on. Mobility is one of the most important aspects of a city. In fact, there’s research done that showed us that people stuck in traffic jams feel more stress than fighter jet pilots or riot police! Traffic jams aside, regular commutes make people unhappy too. Too often, individuals incorrectly assume that a longer commute will pay off financially or in other ways; yet, long commutes don’t compensate for the costs incurred to one’s physical health, social life, time spent with kids or one’s partner, recreation and leisure time, food preparation, stress levels, or sense of meaningfulness, just to name a few. In fact, for every extra hour of commuting time, a 40% increase in salary would be needed to make commuting worth anyone’s while (Stutzer & Frey, 2004)! It’s significant. Even switching a long drive to work with a short walk can have the same effect on happiness as finding a new love! It’s clear that when you cut down commute times, you can have a meaningful effect on people’s happiness. But we know that investing in car infrastructure doesn’t yield sustainable returns, which means the happy cities of the future need to invest in public transit, cycling and walking because they have the biggest effect on happiness and health outcomes as well.

There are various components of happiness. At the heart of it are our core needs: food, water, shelter, safety and security. After the core needs are met, the strongest indicator of happiness is the quality of social relationships (Saphire-Bernstein & Taylor, 2013; Vaillant, 2012). Good relationships keep us healthier, happier and more productive in life and at work. Urban design and policy can significantly affect people’s ability to connect with friends, family and their community. If there’s one key message that we try to send, that’s it; we can design better to increase wellbeing.

MEJPP: You have personally done some interesting work in Egypt. What did you do there and how did it contribute to making Cairo a better city?

HE: Being Egyptian myself, I have been involved in various projects there. I co-founded a start-up called Transport for Cairo that seeks to map all of Cairo’s formal and informal public



transportation routes. Mobility is by far, probably one of Cairo's key challenges. Our work helps Egyptians use public transit but also helps us collect data on its current performance. That's the first step to fixing it.

Egypt ranks very low in terms of happiness; last year, it ranked 120th out of a possible 157 countries on the World Happiness Index and while it moved up to 104th position (out of 155 countries) on the 2017 rankings, it is still in the bottom quintile (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). If you compare it to other Arab countries, it only beats Syria, Yemen, and Iraq – all war torn countries. A major cause of unhappiness in Egypt is mobility, or the lack of it. Traffic jams hinder people's ability to connect, work, and move around the city. The solution is to invest in walkability and public transit and not, as is often expected, to expand road infrastructure further or building fantastical cities in the middle of the desert. Cairo has a long way to go before we can call it a happy city, but unlike what critics say, it is not beyond saving. Cairo is a city of unique history and a profound social capital. The people of Cairo really keep this city alive and it's amazing to see the types of informal systems that people create to survive and in many cases, thrive in it.

MEJPP: You've also recently returned from doing some work in Saudi Arabia. What did you see that was working well in terms of urban planning there? As each context is culturally, socially, geographically, and historically unique, how might your activities either be influenced by or influence the building of better physical places there?

HE: We most recently worked in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. Madinah is the holy city of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. It is where he led the Islamic nation, where his mosque stands and where he is currently buried. That, alone, made our work there of greater significance. Our project focused on Quba street, which connects the Prophet's mosque with Quba mosque, these are the first two mosques in Islamic history. The Madinah Development Authority (MDA) began the process of turning this key historic street into a pedestrian-only street. We helped them assess the site, engage with various stakeholders and conjure up solutions to the next phases of this project. I believe it would be difficult to find many similar projects in the Middle East. It is amazing to see how many more people started using the street after it was implemented. Before, it was choked with car traffic and barely 3000 people went through the street each day (3000 is still a significant number, not surprising due to the religious significance of this corridor). But now, nearly 23,000 people go through it each day! That's more than 8 times as many people. We really encourage Madinah to keep moving forward with projects like this and reclaim more space for people. Middle Eastern cities have spent far too much effort and money building cities and streets only catered for private vehicles. Madinah has been the source of inspiration for Islamic cities throughout history. The historical events that happened there have influenced modern society significantly. It is high time this city starts spreading its influence again, this time it could be through innovative urban planning projects like Quba Street.

MEJPP: These projects suggest that happy cities use urban planning as the means through which happiness can be generated, but the starting point involves something much simpler; that is, knowing the average person on the street and understanding how they use a space, why, and their hopes for it. Yet, consulting with the average person is routinely overlooked. What can you say



about “people” consultation, of which there might be many phases throughout a project, and why it is needed? What happens when it is overlooked and why is it done so little?

HE: It is often daunting for Middle Eastern cities to consider public participation. Yet, there are many reasons to support the value of engaging in such consultation. The first being that governments can't know everything; the residents of a community have insight that officials wouldn't know and can tell you which kerbs are not dropped, where the speed limit is too fast or never observed, and at what time people start getting hostile on the roads. They are the ones who experience that on a daily basis, not the municipal employee who visits (if at all) once a year. So, it's firstly an information gathering tool. But the real value in participation is how the people themselves feel about the information gathering process. We know that one of the components of happiness is a sense of meaning and belonging. When people get together to work on something bigger than themselves, like designing the future of their community, they feel happier for it and as though what they are doing matters. When people participate in building a community they also feel a stronger sense of belonging to it. Meaning and belonging are best built by engaging with the public, allowing them to alter your proposals, and sometimes even giving them full authority on certain design elements. The more you give, the more you will get and it's well known that improved public participation boosts people's trust in government, one of the key indicators of not only good governments, but of good societies on that same Happiness Index.

MEJPP: Lastly, building happier cities, just like building happier individuals, families and communities requires an open, curious approach, along with the reliance on existing empirical data and measurement tools to see whether what is implemented actually works. On that note, if you could offer some interesting ideas for keen researchers to try out in the GCC/MENA region, what might those be? Any closing words of wisdom?

HE: I would encourage them to pilot test ideas that focus on returning spaces to people. That could mean temporary street festivals, block parties, road reclamation projects and flexible social gathering places and when you design these small interventions, make sure to measure their impact on people and tell your story about that experience. These good stories can inspire positive change and, along with data, can serve to change people's minds about what is important about space. I would also encourage GCC/MENA region cities to return cities to the human scale. That means investing in pedestrian, cycling and transit infrastructure, returning cities to a scale where people can live comfortably in them and be part of them, feel connected, attached and co-exist with others peacefully. That means saying “enough” to more highways, bridges and tunnels. These do not solve the problem; they only put a band aid on it. In fact, they worsen it in the long run, adding more debt, maintenance costs and carbon emissions in our cities, not to mention decreasing subjective wellbeing of the very people meant to be served by this infrastructure in the process. The healthiest, happiest cities in the world invest in infrastructure that encourages us to move more efficiently and in a more active way.

Readings of Interest

See the Happy City website at www.thehappycity.com for an extensive selection of press, videos, research publications, and other useful information in the development of your happy city.



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