

An ethnographic study of a Happiness Action Group in Brighton

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Background information

- A group of three PhD students from the University of Sussex (UoS) approached Action for Happiness Brighton (AfHB), asking to study us from an anthropological point of view. We the co-organisers readily agreed.
- The students (or some of them) came to one of our meetings in the Latest Bar, and to several meetings of Happy Cafe in the Emporium.
- They created a presentation to be given to their colleagues at UoS. They also presented this to the AfHB co-organisers in a thorough and very interesting meeting.
- What follows is a slightly edited version of that presentation.

Paul Tofts May 5th 2015

Heard at an Action for Happiness group meeting...

- “I always have the most interesting conversations that I have all week at the Happy Café”
 - Action for Happiness participant
- “This is not a therapy group”
 - Action for Happiness organizer

What is Action for Happiness?

- Action for Happiness is a global movement that was originally established in London but now has voluntary groups throughout the UK and in other countries including Australia, Hong Kong and Greece.
- It pursues a scientific method for achieving happiness, through 10 key principles: Giving, Relating, Exercising, Appreciating, Trying Out, Direction, Resilience, Emotion, Acceptance and Meaning.
- The Action for Happiness website and the events they organise provide different tools and ideas for applying these principles in everyday life.

Aims

This was a first ethnographic research practice as part of our PhD programme. It was an opportunity to explore different research techniques and to reflect on the process and its challenges in the context of a small project in Brighton.

This research project aimed to examine the discourses and practices of a popular self-help group in Brighton called Action for Happiness.

The project aimed to understand what makes this group successful and appealing to hundreds of Brighton residents, by engaging with and interviewing its organisers and some of its members.

Research questions

- Why did the organisers and members join this particular group, as opposed to other groups, wellbeing-related or otherwise?
- What in their view makes this group particularly important and relevant in today's society?
- How do members apply the 10 keys for happier living in their everyday lives?
- What are the everyday challenges of putting some of these principles into practice?
- Does the group ever face any challenges with being misunderstood and does the group ever face any conflicts with the methods/messages?

Methods

- Social media – facebook, meetup
- Participant observation – happy café, other events
- Interviewing – with organizers and participants
- Short life histories
- Textual/documentary analysis – policy and tool documents, news stories about the organisations
- Reflexive journals
- Collaborative approach

Ethical issues and how we addressed them

- Accessing the group – deciding on a collaborative approach from the beginning.
- Disrupting the flow of events – decided against recording and writing excessively
- Intruding into people's personal lives/issues – formed bonds before approaching people for interviews; informed every new person we met at the group of our role as researchers

What went well?

- Working together and delegating
- Winning the trust and support of the organizers by contacting them before attending events and talking them through our process.
- Finding a refreshing lack of cynicism (about our research and about life in general) and genuine inspiration and openness among everyone that we encountered during the project.

What challenges did we face?

- Dual role of participant and researcher
- Diversity of group and multiple experiences made it difficult to understand the group's unified whole within the short research period.
- Gradual immersion in and sympathy towards the group narrowed possibility for objectivity through critical distance.
- Approaching group as a whole and individual participants for interviewing given the unpredictability of people's perception of and comfort with us as researchers (a reaction to us as researchers or due to their natural behaviour?)

What did we learn about the group?

1. Motivation for joining

- Foreigners, new in town, looking to connect with people
- people (but men especially) looking for a non-judgemental place to meet and talk (otherwise an absence places for men)
- People who are optimistic and actively seeking ‘something’ in their life and wanting to get ideas and inspiration from others
- People who are in between jobs, stuck in a rut, looking for ideas to make a change (the social nature of the group makes it inaccessible for people who are suffering from serious depression)
- Offers participants sense of belonging
- Curiosity/desire for something fresh
- People looking for place outside typical ‘bar and dating scene’ to meet other like minded people and have interesting conversations
- People who were primarily interested in Action for Happiness tools in order to apply them in their lives amidst personal challenges

2. Appeal of this group

- It is secular and free and informal – exemplified by atmosphere of openness, body language, smiling and sincerity of participants.
- No tight structures and obligations (one lady confided in me that the happy café had previously been less enjoyable when it had followed a more strict structure based around mandatory reading and book reviews)
- Diverse mix of people - gender, background, age
- Over-arching purpose of ‘happiness’-seeking creates unspoken atmosphere of openness to a range of topics that would not normally be ‘on the table’ among strangers or in every day life.
- Willingness of people to share feelings and life experiences offers opportunities for co-learning and co-discovery that are not present in every day life.
- Focus on ‘Action’: provides practical and easily implementable tools to guide daily living and bring structure to life and thought.
- Scientific rationalizations of achieving and sustaining happiness (biochemical mix in brain, psychological benefits of giving etc.) reassured people who may otherwise have been sceptical about a ‘new age’ spiritual group.
- Deliberately positive messages and social atmosphere enables people to overcome feeling of negativity and isolation – physical fact of meeting face to face has a positive emotional and wellbeing effect for people.

3. Diversity and dynamism

- Different dynamic at every meeting.
- Some people wanting more structured events, others happy to talk and let the conversation flow.
- Different people attending each week.
- Different backgrounds, ages, gender, etc.
- Interesting spectrum of scientific and spiritual and lay beliefs and easy exchange between all of these.

4. Group challenges

- Group sometimes faces being misunderstood as quasi-religious organisation.
- Bad press relating to scepticism about ‘quantifying’ happiness.
- General lack of consensus about structure of events.

Collaborative research results

- We presented our findings to the Action for Happiness volunteer co-organisers
- They made the following observations:
 - Action for Happiness is not a self-help group. The organisers view the group more as a movement. ‘We are not doing therapy on ourselves’. There is a general lack of any victim mentality at the Happy Café – anything is on the table, even if people may not share the same politics etc. The term self-help was therefore deleted from the final presentation submitted to the course convenor.
 - Organisers were content with our findings and suggested that they are forwarded to the group CEO, Mark Williamson.
 - Some organisers admitted they were initially sceptical of our research project, but felt reassured by our collaborative approach and the way in which the research was conducted.

What we would do if we had more time

- Interview ‘outsiders’ to gauge their perception of the group.
- Attend more events.
- Conduct more interviews once a rapport had built up between us and group.

Thank you!

