



# Happy? Check. Thriving? Check. Consider yourself truly Irish

Ireland is mired in financial calamity, and we're not afraid to complain about it, so why does survey after survey prove us to be among the world's happiest, most optimistic people? Because it's not all about money, reports **Arminta Wallace**

**H**ERE WE go again. The latest Gallup global well-being survey, published earlier this week, reports that we Irish rate ourselves "among the most fulfilled and optimistic in the world". We came in 10th in this league table of nations, with 62 per cent of the 1,000 Irish people surveyed describing themselves as thriving. The result put us just behind Australia (65 per cent) and Canada (69 per cent); at the other end of the scale are Haiti (3 per cent) and Chad (1 per cent).

The survey was carried out before the EU-IMF bailout and the January tax hikes, but it confirms an underlying trend. In surveys, if not in the pub, we consistently pronounce our lives to be grand, thanks. So what's really going on? Are we genuinely cheerful and contented or are we just reluctant to face up to economic, social and environmental realities? The answer, strangely, could be both.

All surveys – even Gallup surveys, whose questions are nuanced to the nth degree – need to be interpreted and placed in context, as Colm Harmon, the economist who heads the **Geary** Institute for behaviour and health research at University College Dublin, explains. There's a big debate among economists about the implications of happiness surveys. It used to be assumed, according to what's called the Easterlin paradox, that so long as people saw themselves as on a par with or slightly better off than their neighbours they'd report themselves as happy. Having lots more money, as opposed to a little more, made no difference.

According to Harmon, the recent series of Gallup polls turns this idea on its head. They show that well-being and happiness are highest in the richest countries. "You might expect Ireland to be grumpy and unhappy now," he says. "But in fact Ireland is still at the upper end of the global GDP-per-capita figures, and we have a level of life satisfaction that's very similar to the countries around us: Norway, Britain and the US. We're now in a rich countries' club, and people realise that when they answer these survey questions."

Harmon adds that although Gallup has gone to great lengths to come up with a scientifically valid methodology to compare very different countries, the poll results are often used, in practice, to make some pretty pointless comparisons. ("We're happier than the Finns!

Hooray!") The real point about these survey figures, he stresses, is that they're averages. "We are now in the club of countries that are, on average, pretty well off – and, therefore, are on average pretty happy with our lot. That says nothing about the distribution of that satisfaction internally. That's the real issue that economists like me have to get to grips with."

But how can we possibly be happy, let alone be thriving, under our current crazy circumstances? Tony Bates, the clinical psychologist and *Irish Times* columnist, believes the circumstances themselves might, perversely, have a role to play. "Having lots of options – lots of places I can go, lots of things I can do with my time, lots of things I can buy – sounds great but is actually very stressful," he says. "When options become fewer, as they have since the recession kicked in, in a strange way people become grounded and start to engage with the reality as it is."

People are also, he maintains, reluctant to get into the nitty-gritty of their lives in a survey. "If I ask you, 'Are you happy?' are you going to say to me, 'Well, not really: I'm struggling with the meaning of my life?' You'll probably say, 'Ah, on balance I'm okay.'"

"I mean, personally I am certainly happy, but what I have is happiness from within myself, a confidence that I can face the things that crop up. It's the kind of thing you get after 50 years of living. It was hard won. It wasn't inherited. I never had it when I was growing up – but I would probably never have admitted that I wasn't happy, either."

"Irish people have a natural exuberance. We often stand in our happiest mood singing songs of celebration having lost the fight, whether it's a wake, a lost game, a battle or love or whatever."

This doesn't mean we aren't struggling with life issues. "I think those things coexist for a lot of people. My direct experience with young people, especially, is that they are hugely anxious about the future. The map they had for their lives no longer works for the territory that we're in. It was a very pleasant tourist map  
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Publication: Irish Times Weekend Review

Date: Saturday, April 30, 2011

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Extract: 2 of 4

Circulation: 102543

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which showed them all kinds of nice things they could explore. Now it's like some kind of post-apocalyptic document from this dark world where the only options they have are to leave the country or go back to living with their families in a dependent situation. I see a lot of young people who would be regarded as advantaged, but the lucky kids of the Celtic Tiger are now the lost kids of middle-class families who are experiencing unemployment, cutbacks and all the rest of it."

**HOW ARE WE** to find a new road map for the recessionary world? We could do worse than to consult the great philosophers, many of whom have engaged not just with the meaning of life but with what it means to live a good life. As the crash was beginning to bite, in the autumn of 2009, a series of lectures organised by Trinity College Dublin asked what philosophy might usefully say about the situation. These have now been published in a book, *The Consolations of Philosophy: Reflections in an Economic Downturn*, which explores a range of approaches to life, from stoicism to consumerism.

"There's no party line," says the book's editor, the Trinity philosophy lecturer Paul O'Grady. "But one theme that runs through the essays is that the correlation between happiness or well-being and wealth is quite indirect. You need enough to survive at a certain level, but once you go beyond that there are diminishing returns. Happiness doesn't have to do with the accumulation of wealth."

The philosophical approach would also suggest that an effective grasp of the big picture is central to the good life. "Given that there are conflicting stories about what reality is actually like, understanding the world correctly helps you to orientate yourself," O'Grady says.

"For someone like Boethius" – the Roman statesman who wrote the original *Consolation of Philosophy*, in the sixth century – "it's the understanding that there is a God. For an atheist it might be about family solidarity or a sense of wonder at the universe. Often there's some kind of metaphysical dimension to it, if you think of metaphysics as the way in which things hang together. Having some kind of coherent big picture that integrates with how you live your life seems to be very important."

Ireland's high residual sense of community and family solidarity plays a big part in this, he

says. But to say that things are changing fast is an understatement. "One of the things about social cohesion in Ireland is that it was always a religious picture. There was a whole tight package of religions and the GAA, or religions and politics. Now people are rejecting that, or looking for something else – which is good, because the tightness was very oppressive.

"I do strongly think that you can have ethics without religion, but it's tricky how to instil the ethics, or get them into public life – or even agree on what they should be. Our educational system is totally geared towards points and exams, so citizenship or any of that stuff is treated as something that's not important. It's hard to find the appropriate mechanism that gets people to take it seriously."

O'Grady adds that, while there's no general recipe for happiness, there are some very clear no-nos on the well-being front. "There are destructive forms of behaviour, in particular the abuse of alcohol or drugs, which make people very unhappy and generate a great deal of misery. In Ireland we have a really ambiguous relationship to that. There's the glorification of the craic, and the alcohol culture, and at the same time a denial that it's connected very strongly to suicide and all sorts of social dysfunction."

**BUT EVEN THOSE** who work at the coalface of this appalling reality, such as Joan Freeman, the head of the Pieta House outreach service for suicide and self-harm, which saw a 33 per cent increase in attendance between 2009 and 2010, accept that our consistent scores in well-being surveys tell another kind of truth about the Irish psyche. "I actually agree with that survey result," she says. "We are a very resilient nation. We have shown that we can survive all sorts of extraordinary difficul-

ties, from eating grass during the Famine to poverty during past recessions.

"In terms of suicide and self-harm, if the right response is put in place then people can, and do, survive. And it isn't necessarily a case of big policy changes. A man told me yesterday that his friends felt he was suicidal, and told him so. He went to his parents, who sent his brother to live with him and look after him. After three days he felt much better. This kind of crisis can be very short term. So what we need is not just a response but the right response."

For Tony Bates the results of the Gallup survey may actually be helping us to grow up psychologically. "Maybe this is not a denial of the real difficulties we are facing but an affirmation of our core spirit," he says. "Maybe we're saying, look, life is neither good nor bad. It's just life. Let's face it together, and be open to it, and find within ourselves some joy."



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