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## The Secret of Happy Places

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“He’s not in a good place”. “She’s in a good place right now.” The terminology of self-help and pop psychology uses place as a metaphor for happiness or unhappiness – and with good reason.

Unhappiness can often feel physically immersive: like an environment rather than an internal problem. But for those people lucky enough to have work and safety and basic services, the suspicion that your city or town is ruining your vibe can prove illusory. Many restless souls have discovered that their woes don’t evaporate when they up sticks for somewhere else.

Sometimes, of course, the suspicion that the place is the problem is correct: a crime-ridden Joburg township with no reliable power or water supply is an objectively unhappy place.

But new research into self-reported happiness levels suggests that the psychological effect of communities goes far beyond the provision of basic services. Cities can be unhappy or happy in surprising ways.

For example, the people of Flagstaff, Arizona are among the happiest, on average, in the US, while New Yorkers were among the unhappiest, according to a study by economists Ed Glaeser and Josh Gottlieb.

Flagstaff is a small, friendly city surrounded by forested peaks. Normal people live there. Flagstaff has bluegrass festivals and a healthy economy. Burglaries happen, but often the burglars turn out to be skunks. So, you can understand why the 70 000-odd Flagstaffians are feeling fine.

But why is the Big Apple so sad? Its sons and daughters are supposed to be blessed with urban abundance and excitement, from Broadway to the Mets. Billions around the world envy their glamorous lives. But New Yorkers say they are stressed, anxious and gloomy. Some of them make pots of money as a consolation, but the money doesn’t necessarily make them feel any better.

The reasons for these happiness gaps go beyond obvious factors like a high per capita income, or a great cultural life, or great weather, or idyllic natural surroundings. Those things all count. But a satisfying life is often rooted in less obvious blessings, many of which relate to a sense of community.

One big happiness booster is a high level of economic equality, which is very different from a high average income. When most people have a broadly similar amount of income or wealth, then far fewer people suffer the anxiety, shame or anger that results from being much poorer than many people they see around them.

Studies have shown that the experience of poverty in a mostly poor city or society is not nearly as distressing as that of poverty in an unequal one. (And a narrower wealth gap also means less stress and guilt about privilege in the deepest thoughts of the privileged.)

Inequality is a major happiness killer in New York, despite its gobsmacking wealth. And it’s not just a psychological effect: it shows up in concrete problems like unaffordable rents and decaying public transport. The bottom line is that if a city does not share its surplus fairly, it becomes unhappy.

Sometimes this happiness-inducing fairness can seem boring to people from unfair places. For example, this writer from Joburg once spent a summer living in Oslo, Norway – one of the many Scandinavian and northern European cities that regularly tops the global happiness charts, largely due to high equality and high investment in amenities like public transport, education, culture, green spaces and healthcare. During that summer, I got a glimpse of the magic of the Scandinavian

model of fairness, but I also glimpsed the uptightness that comes preloaded on the model. Social life in unusually happy places like Oslo or Vienna or Helsinki is, counter-intuitively, quite reserved. Strangers are not warmly welcomed. Being loud or eccentric or chaotic is frowned on. Tall poppy syndrome reigns: think of yourself as “special” at your peril.

There is a silver lining to this ‘be normal’ culture: breaking the law in any way is judged harshly by social opinion in Oslo – even transgressions that South Africans would tend to see as trivial, such as parking violations, or dropping junk mail into mailboxes with a “No Junkmail” sticker. And people fear social judgment far more than in South Africa. That means the law is obeyed – finish and klaar. And that in turn means that everyone in Oslo can live a calmer, happier life – even if they tend to express their happiness very discreetly.

Compare the uptight conformism of the Nordics to the more relaxed, wink-wink culture of compliance that reigns in South Africa, say, or Greece. In those two countries (to different degrees) rampant corruption and tax evasion have hobbled state capacity and lowered net happiness levels across the country.

So you can be exuberantly happy living on a tiny island in the Aegean, or in a Wild Coast beach village, until you urgently need a good state hospital, or a good state school. Being too relaxed about small things can soon lead to big things, in other words.

The Nordic states have advantages when it comes to happiness-engineering that date back a long way. They are very old, rooted and homogenous societies, in which everybody broadly trusts collective decisions and thus the decisions of the elected government. The Nordics all had the good sense to build strong welfare states during the long post-World War II economic boom. Nordic national and urban policies have generally been both pro-market and redistributive, with the state’s offer to business being roughly as follows: “We’ll help you make lots of money, then you give us about half that money in tax, and then you and everyone else in town will get lots of good stuff for free.”

That’s a fine balance, and one that countless bad governments, trapped in rigid ideological camps, have failed to strike. But it’s always a balance worth attempting.

It’s all relative, of course. Joburg cannot become Oslo, just as New York cannot become Flagstaff. But one thing’s for sure: if Joburg and New York hope to get happier, they will have to learn to share.