SPECIAL EDITION ‘THE JOURNEY TO SCHOOL’
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Introduction

Sustainable happiness is the pursuit of happiness that does not exploit other people, the environment or future generations (O’Brien, 2005).

Creating a higher quality of life requires us all – individuals and communities – to help create a new political, physical and cultural “infrastructure of well-being” (Gardner and Assadourian, 2004 p. 172).

Ten years ago, transportation planning documents and academic literature rarely mentioned children and youth. It was assumed that “moving people and goods” efficiently encompassed the travel needs of children. Their aspirations were not considered. Today, we know that assumption is incorrect and that this younger sector of the population is particularly susceptible to the adverse health impacts of motorised transportation (Gilbert and O’Brien, 2005). There is also evidence that children are taking more trips by car than children did ten or fifteen years ago and that many of children’s car trips are replacing trips that were once taken by walking or cycling (Gilbert and O’Brien, 2005). Meanwhile, evidence linking public health with transportation and land use planning has reinforced the benefits of planning walkable, liveable communities (Freeman, 2001; Frumkin, 2001) as well as the significance of ignoring the consequences of this relationship.

A Canadian provincial medical officer of health expressed it like this:

An epidemic of overweight and obesity is threatening Ontario’s health... We are now living in ‘obesogenic’ environments: communities, workplaces, schools and homes that actually promote or encourage obesity (MHLC, 2004).

Planning paradigms are shifting as academics and planners have been absorbing and applying concepts related to active living, Smart Growth, New Urbanism, and active transportation. Still, planning for and with children and youth is a relatively new perspective in North America. Considerable credit for raising the profile of young people must go to the tenacious global network of individuals and organizations working to foster active and safe routes to school. Through their efforts, educators, municipal staff, governments, parents, students and academics have been educated about the health, safety and environmental benefits of walking and wheeling to school.

Children’s view of transportation (when walking to school) reminds us that transportation is not only about “moving people and goods.” It is about wonder, discovery, joy and happiness (O’Brien, 2005). The International Walk to School web site¹ has captured their statements

¹ www.iwalktoschool.org
and the words of this five year-old reflects the sentiments of many others. We walk to school because...

"We get to say hello to a kitty or a pup and sing along with the birds".

Apart from melting the heart of most readers, what else does this statement indicate? It suggests that the child enjoys the company of a friend and that together they experience a sense of delight and connection with the wildlife along the way. Another student expressed a similar view:

"Walking and talking with my dad was the best bit. We saw two slugs with no homes, but they still had their aerials, and someone had dropped their apple from their packed lunch. I wish my dad could walk with me all the time".

Ensuring that children are able to travel to school using active transportation contributes to their physical well-being. Mackett and Paskins (2004) have found that the calories burned over the course of a week’s school trip can be equivalent to two physical education classes. There is also evidence that the very activity of walking can elevate one’s mood and contribute to both emotional and physical well-being (Thayer, Godes, Lobato, et al, 2003). There is something more. It also seems to make people feel happy. There, I’ve said it, the "H" word that rarely makes its way into transportation discussions. However, the scope of health benefits from active transportation is incomplete if happiness is overlooked. This paper outlines why we ought to be taking happiness more seriously and demonstrates that walking and cycling to school is an example of sustainable happiness.

It’s easy to imagine the playful sense of adventure that children bring to walking trips. They are very much engaged in the journey. They are living in the moment, the very thing that stress management experts recommend through the practice of mindfulness (now shown to be linked to positive emotions and physical well-being) (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). What about adults? Many of us can think back to childhood days when we walked to school and home again. Those were often carefree trips, talking with friends, kicking pebbles along, negotiating snow banks, jumping in leaf piles or puddles. As adults, those journeys seem like a nostalgic memory as ours daily trips focus on getting to our destinations as quickly as possible. Yet, studies that look at time affluence and subjective well-being (happiness) indicate that people who feel that they have (or make) time for things that are important to them are also happier (Kasser and Brown, 2003).

**Positive Psychology and Sustainability**

Twenty years ago, the Brundtland Commission published *Our Common Future* (WCED,1987), which outlined concerns about the trajectory of development and the harmful impact of those development patterns for all life on the planet, including life that was yet to be born.

For decades, work regarding sustainable development and sustainability has been generating interdisciplinary research, policy development and strategies with many inspiring and effective outcomes. Nevertheless, our progress toward sustainability has fallen considerably short of what is required. Environmental educators struggle to change...
unsustainable behaviour through public education, desperate to garner attention around pressing issues. It is challenging to counteract the social and cultural milieu of the consumer society. Worldwatch President, Christopher Flavin (2004), states that “the drive to acquire and consume now dominates many peoples’ psyches, filling the space once occupied by religion, family, and community” (p. xvii). Increasingly, our consumption patterns in the North are dependent on the availability of cheap labour in the South (Klein, 2000) and we transport ourselves in droves to shop at ‘big box’ stores that provide these products.

Positive psychology and happiness studies have been realising a far more rapid course than sustainability, influencing work in economics, business, health, and social policy discussions. Over the past six years one can track its progress as one discipline after another realizes its relevance. Radio shows, television broadcasts and a multitude of books about happiness are raising the profile of happiness studies in the public’s eye. Time magazine (2005) published a special feature on the ‘science of happiness.’

There is a natural connection between sustainability and positive psychology. In a consumer society, where consumption and happiness are inextricably linked, it is understandable that individuals confuse the “path to the ‘good life’ as the ‘goods life’” (Kasser, 2006, p. 200). One car manufacturer chose to reinforce the perception that happiness and consumption are linked through a magazine advertisement that displayed a luxury car with the following caption, “Happiness, Starting at $37,000.”

Municipal and national governments are embedded in these consumer societies and public policy grapples with meeting the goals for sustainability while enmeshed in public perceptions of happiness that are closely tied to consumption. For example, municipal planners know that denser land use planning and the reduction of car use is central to developing healthier communities. Canadian planners say, however, that many affluent suburban residents demand single-family dwellings on large lots with 3-car garages. And developers are happy to comply.

What’s to be done? In a world where global warming has begun (IPCC, 2007) and climate scientists are investigating both mitigation measures and adaptations measures, where human suffering has reached almost unfathomable levels, what possible relevance could research on happiness have? Are happiness studies merely a pleasant diversion from all the bad news and despair while the real work is being done in the academic trenches of other disciplines? Perhaps that sentiment was best voiced by a transportation colleague who said, “I don’t care if people are happy, I just want them to get out of their cars!”

My view is that the pursuit of happiness must become an essential component of our discussions – and transportation is no exception. Happiness is at the heart of who we are, what we do, as well as the decisions and policies we make. Our pursuit of happiness is changing the world, and clearly, not always for the better. Sustainability literature has only just begun to incorporate positive psychology (Starke, 2004; NEF, 2006). Conversely, few positive psychologists,
with the exception of Kasser (2006) draw connections to sustainability, unless reference is being made to sustaining happiness, (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Happiness is far more than the “H” word that has been sidelined in transportation literature. Rather, results from happiness research point to opportunities for shifting policy and practice that are perfectly aligned with sustainable transportation efforts.

**Happiness and Health**

Happiness is defined by Veenhoven (2006) as “the overall appreciation of one’s life-as-a-whole, in short, how much one likes the life one lives” (p.2). This is often measured through tests of subjective well-being and life satisfaction. While definitions of happiness may vary, researchers have demonstrated that one’s subjective experience of happiness corresponds with numerous positive health outcomes (Steptoe, Wardle, and Marmot, 2005). Seligman (2002) writes that happy people “have better health habits, lower blood pressure and feistier immune systems than less happy people” (p.40). They are also more likely to seek out and act upon health information.

Veenhoven (2006) completed an extensive survey of studies regarding the relationship between happiness and physical and mental well-being. “The observed positive effects of happiness on longevity [in healthy populations] are quite sizable and amount to 7, 5 and 10 years” (p. 5). He discusses the implications for preventive health care. “This finding that happiness adds to health opens new ways for health promotion, preventive public health care in particular. It implies that we can make people healthier by making them happier” (p. 6). Veenhoven’s findings have tremendous implications for transport policy and practice. Creating and sustaining environments that contribute to individual and public happiness are likely to have positive outcomes for public health. Very likely, this would include walkable, liveable communities but further research is needed to verify this.

Happiness appears to carry substantial physiological clout. Rather than being an inconsequential, but desirable, feeling it appears to be associated with physical and emotional well-being. Another facet of happiness research investigates the interrelationship between subjective well-being and the natural environment. Nisbet, Zelenski and Murphy (in press) have found that nature-relatedness is correlated with subjective well-being. Brown and Kasser (2005) write that an intrinsic value orientation is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Individuals who are intrinsically oriented tend to be “oriented toward personal growth, relationships and community involvement” (Brown and Kasser, 2005, p. 350). Moreover, an intrinsic value orientation has been associated with an inclination to engage in environmentally friendly behaviour such as cycling and recycling. (Kasser and Sheldon, 2000; Sheldon and McGregor, 2000; Richins and Dawson, 1992).

In summary, paying attention to what contributes to individual and public happiness ought to be an important public policy consideration given the multiple links to wellness. In addition, sustainability efforts may be augmented considerably if public education and policy reinforced a more sustainable pursuit of happiness – that is, sustainable happiness. The concept of
‘sustainable happiness’ is intended to strengthen the relationship between happiness and sustainability and to stimulate discussion in various domains. Another aim is to emphasise the interconnections across time and space that our policies and practices are having, as well as the potential for more extensive positive impacts.

**Sustainable Happiness**

Sustainable happiness is relevant to essentially every definition of happiness. If we are talking about the momentary pleasure of drinking a cup of coffee, for example, we can consider whether that cup of coffee is fair trade coffee. Has one’s momentary pleasure of coffee, (or anything else for that matter), come at the expense of someone else or the natural environment? On a daily basis, there are countless choices that individuals, organisations, and governments make which could contribute to sustainable happiness; whether we look at one’s commute to work, an organisation’s procurement policies, a municipal plan for active transportation, or a student’s trip to school. All of these moment-to-moment, day-to-day choices have the potential to leave a legacy of sustainable happiness.

Perspectives from positive psychology have yet to influence transport and urban planning policy and practice. There is one notable exception – during his tenure as mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa, chose to “plan for happiness” (O’Brien, 2005). He also focused on the needs of children. Meanwhile, research on children’s health and transportation (O’Brien, 2001) has examined the needs and aspirations of children. This research brings us full circle, back to happiness.

Peñalosa created urban infrastructure and public space that gave priority to children and to those who don’t own an automobile.

We had to build a city not for businesses or automobiles, but for children and thus for people. Instead of building highways, we restricted car use. ... We invested in high-quality sidewalks, pedestrian streets, parks, bicycle paths, libraries; we got rid of thousands of cluttering commercial signs and planted trees. ... All our everyday efforts have one objective: Happiness (Peñalosa and Ives, 2002).

Prior to Enrique’s tenure as mayor, his brother, Gil Peñalosa, was the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation in Bogotá. He expanded the existing Ciclovia program from 13 kilometres to 91 kilometres of road closures every Sunday. He writes about this in the context of sustainable happiness.

*Ciclovia* attracted over 1.5 million people every week to walk, run, bike or skate. Despite the multiple issues happening in the country, this was the safest and most enjoyable place. On average, people were doing 50 minutes of physical activity but stayed on the Ciclovia for over 4 hours, enjoying other people’s company. Obviously this is very respectful of people, the environment and future generations (G. Peñalosa, 2007).

Enrique Peñalosa’s focus on children and happiness led him to create “infrastructures of well-being.” Similar accomplishments are being reported

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2 The Latin American term Ciclovia refers to the temporary closing of streets to allow dominance by other road users.
through work on child-friendly cities. More than 800 municipalities are now registered on UNICEF’s Child Friendly City web site www.childfriendlycity.org. In Canada, our Centre for Sustainable Transportation has developed Child- and Youth-Friendly Land Use and Transport Planning Guidelines (Gilbert and O’Brien, 2005) and we are working with municipalities to integrate the Guidelines into policy and practice. This includes recommendations for municipalities to support Active & Safe Routes to School.

Further evidence for the value of creating “infrastructures of well-being” are found in the Delightful Places Survey (O’Brien, 2006). Working with the National Center for Bicycling and Walking in the US, O’Brien (2006) developed a Delightful Places Survey to explore links between well-being and the urban and non-urban areas that respondents experience as “delightful.” The activity that was associated most often (80%) with a delightful place is relaxation. As one survey respondent stated:

“Delightful places are best incorporated into routine experiences and not once in a while places to enjoy. Relaxation in a city needs to be almost like routine treatments – once a year is helpful but not lasting. A little pleasantness almost every day starts to have a cumulative and positive effect”.

How does one create a delightful place (apart from those that exist naturally)? Respondents generally noted the very things that are recommended for liveable communities:

Create a walkable city (like Vancouver), and limit cars inside the perimeter. Include wide sidewalks, good transportation options, plant trees and flowers, good lighting for night time accessibility, create lots of little neighbourhood areas with all services needed within the neighbourhood. Create multiple-use buildings.

Creating communities that enhance social interaction may also contribute to happiness and reinforce the ‘virtuous circle’ described by Martin (2005).

Happiness and sociability go hand in hand...research has also shown that we have a higher quantity and quality of social interactions when we are happy...Happy people find social encounters more satisfying, they adopt a less cautious social style, and they are more inclined to be cooperative and generous. What is more, this link between sociability and happiness works both ways; sociable people, become happier and happy people become more sociable, creating a virtuous.

Results from happiness studies affirm sustainability principles rather than supporting over-consumption. This leads to intriguing and potentially profound opportunities. Can we create communities, towns, and cities that make people happier sustainably and thus contribute to public and environmental health and well-being?

Currently, public happiness may be an inherent intention of many politicians and planners, but it is not explicit. Consequently, the question of whose view of happiness is influencing the vision for our cities tends to be unexamined. Are we incorporating the aspirations of children? Usually, not. Are we catering to the “happiness” of car drivers? Most often, the answer is, yes.
Without more explicit discussions regarding public happiness there continues to be tension between sustainability objectives and meeting the more public demands that are embedded in a consumer society view of happiness. Conversely, communities that recognise the value of community cohesion or aim to preserve a liveable neighbourhood are often thwarted in their efforts as schools are closed, roads are widened and bicycle lanes are overlooked in road development.

**Liveable, Walkable Communities and Sustainable Happiness**

There are few studies that have looked at happiness and transportation. Kahneman and Krueger (2006) investigated the daily experiences of more than 900 Texas working women through a combination of daily diaries and a technique called experience sampling through which they registered their mood at various points throughout the day. Their daily commute was the least enjoyable activity. However, their mode of transportation was not part of the study and Kahneman has indicated (personal email) that it is unlikely that the study participants were cycling. A Statistics Canada study found that workers who walk or cycle to work are more likely to enjoy commuting than commuters who use motorised transportation (Turcotte, 2006). It is not clear whether the happiest commuters are active commuters or whether commuting actively contributes to happiness, or both.

With the limited child-related research available it is not yet possible to state definitively that walkable, liveable communities make children happier and thus contribute to their well-being beyond the physical activity. Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs could readily contribute to this research by gathering data on subjective well-being and the trip to school. Certainly the words of Canadian children suggest that this relationship exists:

“Everyone in our school tries to walk for a healthy body and safer streets. I like walking to school with my friends because we could talk. Walking is way better than riding in a car because walking is more fun than getting a ride” (Student at Morton Way Public School, Brampton, Ontario, Canada).

Some may wonder whether those happy walkers are a minority while the majority of children would prefer to be chauffeured as car passengers. The Ontario Walkability Study (O’Brien, 2001) surveyed more than 6,000 elementary students on International Walk to School Day 2001 (IWKAL). The study found that nearly 75% of students surveyed would prefer to walk or cycle to school regularly.

On the other side of the globe, intermediate students who walk to school in Auckland were asked why they walk to school. The most common responses were that “walking was a good form of exercise” and they “liked walking with friends” (Orsini, 2006, p.4). They were also asked to suggest how their peers might be motivated to walk as well. The most common recommendations were to tell students that walking is “healthy for your body and fun when you walk with your friends” (Orsini, 2006, p. 5).

Also, a study involving a small group of high school youth who regularly cycle to school in Vancouver explored what
motivates them to use their bicycles (Orsini and O’Brien, 2006). The top three motivations were that it is fun, fast and makes them fit.

Jacky Kennedy has been involved with SRTS since its inception in Canada and manages the program for the province of Ontario. Her view is the following:

“We’ve watched Walking School Buses start off with just two or three families and gradually increase to involve the entire community – imagine the site of 50 or so happy, smiling faces arriving at school and parents lingering on for a coffee with teachers, getting to know each other better. It’s really amazing. This is how we will achieve sustainability – one person, one school, one positive experience at a time” (J. Kennedy, email communication, 2007).

In an era when parents are struggling with extracting children from television, computer and video games it is encouraging to hear that children garner enjoyment from socializing with friends on their way to school. We have, readily at hand, an opportunity to nurture social engagement, physical well-being and emotional well-being – even better, children are telling us that this mode of travel is their preferred mode!

School policies and sustainable happiness
In order to support active trips to school and the associated community benefits it is paramount that the trend toward school closures and super-sized schools be re-evaluated. Economic efficiency is the argument that is often provided to support school closures. Yet this is an old economic paradigm that neglects the broader perspective demanded by sustainability. Saving money in one part of the public purse while ignoring implications for public health simply shifts the economic burden from one pocket to another. But it is far worse than this as children are bussed out of their community, lengthening the bus ride and fragmenting the fabric of the community. Residents of a community on Cape Breton Island (Nova Scotia, Canada) attempted to demonstrate this to the Nova Scotia Department of Education when it proposed to close several rural schools.

Parents and school children staged a noisy protest that disrupted traffic on the trans-Canada highway near their town and vowed to continue their ‘battle’ with the school board (King, 1999h, p.13 in Corbin and Hunter, 2002, p. 191).

Parents in two other small communities, who learned of a proposed school closing and a one-hour commute for children, staged protests. Seeing a community without children as no community at all, indignant parents occupied the school, locking out administrators, teachers and students for more than a week...Most of the community supported the protest. Local businesses closed their doors and darkened storefronts one afternoon, in an attempt to show the media and politicians what the towns might eventually look like if the school was closed (Corbin and Hunter, 2002, p.191).

Corbin and Hunter noted that residents elevated their efforts to become activists after attempts to gain attention to their concerns through ‘normal’ channels proved to be ineffective. Following these more dramatic efforts the Minister of Education met with the communities and recognised the merit of

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their position. Nevertheless, the schools were closed.

Diener and Seligman (2004) articulate the limited perspective that comes from evaluating progress through the lens of economics and efficiency alone. They point to the fact that the GDP in the US tripled over the last 50 years, while measures of life satisfaction did not rise and the incidence of depression has escalated. They discuss the loss of social capital and Twenge’s (2002) conclusion that “rising dysphoria in the United States is in part due to the breakdown of social connectedness” (p.7). The hyper mobility of American society is also discussed and the authors warrant that “policies that encourage long-distance mobility and discourage individuals from forming long-lasting community ties” (p.20) are not conducive to fostering well-being.

Declining enrolment is a reality that will continue to face many education authorities. Finding solutions that do not create longer commutes for children than adults; solutions that foster active transportation and community connection are sorely needed. Education policies that are made in isolation from public health considerations are not consistent with principles of sustainability and the systems that reinforce this silo decision making are outdated.

Conclusion
Children are telling us that they prefer active modes of transportation and experiences of happiness appear to coincide with these travel choices. Sustainable transportation research, policy and practice could be augmented through happiness literature, particularly with regard to fostering sustainable behaviour. Further research that investigates the potential links between happiness, active transportation and urban planning has promising implications for public health. Future empirical research may indeed confirm that happiness and walking or wheeling to school contribute to happiness and well-being. Children already know this.

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