Pioneer in Subjective Quality of Life Research: Andrew E. Clark

Andrew Clark¹

Published online: 21 January 2022

© The International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) and Springer Nature B.V. 2022

I have been lucky with many aspects of my life. And in German, the words for happiness and luck are the same, so that probably proves something.

I was born in 1963 in a not particularly salubrious part of East London. At that time, the local Borough council offered scholarships for a few children to go to fee-paying schools as a function of their age-11 exam results. Many things are relative in life, and my performance was good enough (or other people's was bad enough) that I was able to receive one of these grants.

Going to a rather select school was a great change. Not only was it two long bus rides away (we had school six days a week: I once calculated that I spent two entire weeks a year on buses), but I was surrounded by many clever children. My belief in peer effects probably dates from this time. I was good in some subjects, terrible in others. One of the latter was Geography, which I just couldn't grasp. Until we changed teacher! All of a sudden, I was quite enthralled (and actually

✉ Andrew Clark
andrew.clark@ens.fr

¹ Paris School of Economics and Centre National de La Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, France

passed my age-16 exam in the subject: something of a miracle). Students chose three or four subjects post age-16, and I learned that this same teacher taught Economics. I had no idea what that was, but I took it anyway. And so the adventure began.

Economics is often thought to be a synonym for Finance. After a brave but fundamentally-flawed attempt at entering Oxford, I took a year off and went to work in a large multi-national bank. That cured me of a career in Finance.

I ended up at the University of Warwick, in a very dynamic Department. There was no mention of subjective well-being during my undergraduate years, but hats off to Ben Knight, who was a) my second-year tutor and b) mentioned Veblen's conspicuous consumption as part of a Microeconomics course.

I returned to London for my Masters and PhD at the LSE. Some may find the use of "E." in my name affected. It partly dates back to my year in the LSE MSc programme, which included three Andrew Clark(e)s, leading to untold confusion.

Entrance to the LSE PhD programme did not require a thesis topic or a supervisor, which was a good job as I had neither. After about five months of faffing about, I was cornered (literally) in a corridor by a member of staff who wanted to know what I was working on. My answer of "Er, Economics" did not convince, and I was told to immediately go and talk to the visitor from the University of Oxford who was one door along the said corridor: that visitor was Andrew Oswald.

My PhD with Andrew was on the Economics of Trade Unions. When I defended in 1989, both Andrew and I went to Dartmouth College, where Andrew's long-standing co-author Danny Blanchflower had moved a little earlier. I had a great time in the US, where I learnt how hospitable Department members could be to each other.

None of us worked on well-being at Dartmouth. The breakthrough came in 1991, when I returned to the UK at the new institute at the University of Essex that was launching the British Household Panel Survey. This survey included a question on job satisfaction. Andrew Oswald, ever inventive, said wouldn't it be interesting if job satisfaction depended not only on own income but also on comparisons to others. This idea of comparisons in wages was often found in Industrial Relations (and indeed in many Social Sciences), and this data would allow us to test it statistically.

The first regression was run on data from the Wave 1 pilot (under 300 observations, I believe) ... and it worked! Job satisfaction rose in own wages, but fell with the wages of other people who looked like you (same age, education, occupation etc.). We were very impressed; journal referees much less so, and the paper ("Satisfaction and Comparison Income") was rejected five times over the next years. It was finally published five years after starting the project and is one of my most highly-cited papers.

I would like to say that this research set off a revolution in Economics, but it didn't. However, I was fortunate in those early years to meet researchers in other Social Science disciplines who were enthusiastic about discussion and collaboration in the area of subjective well-being. Very early on, there was Peter Warr, who was visiting the LSE, and a 1993 conference organised by Andrew Oswald (including talks by Robert Frank, Richard Freeman, Danny Kahneman and Ruut Veenhoven, amongst others) stands out.

I can't say that I'd heard of ISQOLS at this point, but that was because it didn't exist. I cannot now remember how (did Ruut mention it to me?), but I got wind of

a meeting that I now call “ISQOLS Zero” in British Columbia in 1996. This was a game-changer: I was the only Economist there and was to have many loud discussions (the conference was partly sponsored by a local brewery) with Psychologists, Sociologists and many new species of researchers. More to the point, this and other very early events were where I met Joe Sirgy, Don Rahtz, Alex Michalos and Ed Diener. A discussion in the lunch queue with the latter (as I remember) was to lead to a very fruitful collaboration between the two of us with another Psychologist (Rich Lucas) and another Economist (Yannis Georgellis). Neither discipline could write in the other’s style (which Ed memorably called PsychoBabble and EconJargon), but we did manage to publish three of the earliest papers on adaptation to life events in large-scale long-run panel data.

In the meantime, I had “temporarily” moved to France in 1993, where I jumped from Post Doc to Post Doc to Consultant before finally nailing down a permanent position in 1997. The French research environment has been very good to me, and in particular has never laid down any firm rules on what Economists “should” be working on.

Perhaps one of the things that subjective well-being research has taught us about our everyday lives is the value of gratitude letters. Well, I’m not going to do that, but here are some gratitude bullet points.

- My parents for insisting on education. And in particular my mother for not letting me leave school at 16.
- My school Geography (and Economics) teacher, Clive Pearson, for his enthusiasm and telling me which Universities to apply to.
- Andrew Oswald, for everything.
- Danny Blanchflower, for teaching me how to code in SPSS in 1987 and giving an inexperienced 26-year-old the possibility of moving to an Ivy League college.
- The recruitment committee of the French Research Agency (the CNRS), who didn’t think it too odd that an Economist wanted to work on subjective well-being, comparisons to others, and adaptation.
- Ed Diener, for so many things and introducing me to Philly Cheese Steaks.
- Dick Easterlin, for being disrespectful about one of my favourite shirts and being an all-round good guy.
- Richard Layard, for permanently making me work outside of my comfort zone.
- My co-authors, who have been a permanent source of inspiration, and amongst whom I count many close friends.

It is said that you make your own luck. This is not true for me: the people listed above, and so many more, have made my luck for me. I thank them all.

Selected Publications

Clark, A. E., & Oswald, A. J. (1996). Satisfaction and Comparison Income. *Journal of Public Economics*, 61, 359–381.

- Clark, A. E., Frijters, P., & Shields, M. (2008). Relative Income, Happiness and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46, 95–144.
- Clark, A. E., D'Ambrosio, C., & Ghislandi, S. (2016). Adaptation to Poverty in Long-Run Panel Data. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 98, 591–600.
- Clark, A. E., Flèche, S., Layard, R., Powdthavee, N., & Ward, G. (2018). *The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being over the Life-Course*. Princeton University Press.
- Lucas, R., Clark, A. E., Georgellis, Y., & Diener, E. (2004). Unemployment Alters the Set-Point for Life Satisfaction. *Psychological Science*, 15, 8–13.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.