**Abstract**

**The Accomplishment of Happiness: Feminism, Pleasure, Heterosexuality and Consumption.**

This article explores some of the available sociological orientations towards happiness, linking these with feminist debates about pleasure, heterosexuality, agency and consumption, as well as utilising my own autobiographical narrative from working with other feminists over the years in academia. Its central premise is that feminist debates and concerns can take forward sociological debates on happiness in new directions and in more nuanced ways. Conversely, current sociological theorising on happiness can inform contemporary feminist debates on the key issues that I focus on. Two UK ESRC case studies on mundane heterosexualities and footwear, identity and transition are utilised to argue for the need to see happiness as an accomplishment that is achieved within social relationships, and through the life course.

**Key Words**: feminism, happiness, pleasure, heterosexuality, consumption, agency

**The Accomplishment of Happiness: Feminism, Pleasure, Heterosexuality and Consumption.**

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**Introduction**

Drawing initially on the author’s collaborative empirical research on heterosexuality, this article considers but also problematises the notion of happiness as an oppressive normalising concept that acts to breed misery, in that individuals are led to compare their own experiences with popular cultural references such as: 'happily married', 'living happily ever after', 'domestic bliss'. Recent feminist debate on happiness has been influenced by Sarah Ahmed’s (2010) arguments around this issue, and specifically for my purposes here, her view that happiness can be seen to have a more or less positive association with some life choices, and not others. More specifically as Downes (2012) argues, Ahmed’s main argument I consider here is ‘that the promise of happiness (including its objects, rituals and trajectory) is located in the production of privilege (in marriage, family, monogamy, employment, money, heterosexuality, gender norms and citizenship)’ (2012, p.233).

However, my argument also draws on recent work by Cieslik (2015) and others which places more stress on the relational, negotiated and creative dimensions of happiness, including a critique of some of Ahmed’s ideas. I also, in this article, examine my more recent collaborative research on footwear and identity in relation to these ideas. Thus, a common place notion of shoes (in this case) as a source of superficial hedonism, one strongly associated with their unthinking consumption (more often by women) and its connection to normative femininity, is examined critically through empirical data. Thisspeaks to and interrogates such assumptions and also contemporary theoretical ideas on happiness.

To this end, the article also speaks to the idea of happiness as the outcome of effort or struggles, and as a practical accomplishment - by following the 'shoe lives' of very different women, one who is resistant to the easy hedonism of high street consumption, and another who seeks to negotiate transition to femininity through footwear which allows her disability to be side stepped, and in doing so traces the contours of fluid, relational and processual identities. In this way, my arguments chime with Cieslick and Bartram’s (2014) view, that the study of happiness: ‘..can facilitate analyses of everyday experiences and the changing identities of individuals’ (2014, 1.7).

The article will, therefore, explore the connections and problematics of the interrelation of feminism, happiness, pleasure and the possibilities of agency through diverse empirical research in relation to two UK ESRCcase studies. Specifically, it highlights two concerns which have been discussed in both feminist and sociological theorising on happiness. One is the critique of ‘superficial’ consumption practices which are seen in popular consciousness and popular culture to be a route to the attainment of happiness. The other is the theorising of structural constraints on women’s pleasure, specifically here the institution of heterosexuality, which for some theorists, have been equated to unhappiness and a lack of agency. Importantly, I also suggest that the collaborative production of (feminist) knowledge has informed my own theoretical process and understanding on these issues.

**Definitions and debates on happiness**

Cieslik (2015) argues that sociologists, in particular, have tended to see happiness as a problematic, that is both a subjective phenomenon and also linked to the more negative aspects associated with modernity, consumerism, anomie and alienation, and that this is despite ‘well being’ becoming a much discussed topic more recently, in relation to issues surrounding happiness. He further argues that debate with a general focus on popular, scientific and structural factors seen primarily as affecting wellbeing, have obscured theoretical insights into well being itself in everyday life. (See Davies, 2016 for a discussion of happiness and self- obsession, for example.) Further, he frames his discussion in the context of happiness and wellbeing being seen as interchangeable. In effect then, he agrees with Ahmed (2010), on this point who similarly argues that the ‘happiness turn’ can be seen to be reflected and created in self help literature that promises happiness can be obtained through individual effort, and increasingly in government policies, where well being and happiness are inextricably linked, and used as a performance indicator to illustrate economic growth and progress.

It is notable that Cieslik and Bartram (2014) concede that ‘Research funding is won and academic careers are made through the examination of pathologies-poverty, illness, crime and the reduction in suffering-rather than via the investigation of the good things in life and society’ (2014, 1.2). In contrast, core to my argument here is the importance of the correlation with happiness and pleasure, a connection that has been imagined and re-imagined within historical and contemporary feminist debates surrounding pleasure (for instance, Ahmed (2010), posits the idea that the term feminist ‘killjoy’ is attached to feminists who might be seen to be rather inconveniently raising the idea that particular definitions of happiness justify oppression.) I discuss this connection initially in relation to my work on heterosexuality, structure and agency. This set of interests does chime with Cieslik and Bartram’s (2014) observation that ‘ ..happiness is experienced in ways that connect to those structural and agentic processes that frame the sociological imagination’ (2014, 1.6). Or for my purposes here, the broader feminist, and interdisciplinary imagination that has focused on heterosexuality as an institution, and not necessarily or always on the multiple and diverse everyday experience of individuals and social lives.

Moreover, I am concerned also with another area of my research, that is, peoples’ identities in relation to embodied footwear choice and use as illustrative of the ‘good things’ in life, in both the popular imagination and popular culture. Indeed, as I have asked before (Robinson, 2015), as a symbol of superficial and hedonistic consumerism, and especially in relation to the construction and performance of femininity, what could be more symbolic than the ubiquitous image and artefact of the ‘shoe’?

Cieslik (2015), via the ideas of Sayer (2011), refers to the idea of the use of lay normativity as opposed to dominant structural systems. Thus, values that matter to people and pattern everyday reflection are useful for me to investigate both everyday experiences of heterosexuality and footwear consumption. So too is his use of Aristotle: ‘Aristotle (2009) viewed happiness much more as a concrete, grounded activity (praxis) whereby individuals make ongoing choices about how best to live their daily lives.’ (Cieslik, 2015, 426). Therefore, as I go on to explore in the next section on heterosexuality through previously gathered qualitative data, it is the mundane subjective experience, embodiment, practices and performance of heterosexual lives that reveal how happiness in a specifically feminist context, might be theorised anew.

**Heterosexuality**

Happiness can be defined, as I note above, in relation to pleasure, (indeed, for some happiness may be experiencing pain as pleasure, witness the historical lesbian S/M debates and more contemporary arguments around BDSM, which others would find antithetical, see Califia, 1989; Deckha, 2011). Linking pleasure to happiness allows us to focus on some relevant historical debates in this context, as well as bring out issues of pleasure (and power) in relation to my collaborative empirical work over a long period of time. In feminist theory, particularly, happiness has therefore, already been theorised in relation to pleasure. Though it has also been theorised in relation to danger. The historical context I encountered when I was a feminist and student on an MA Women’s Studies course in the 1980s, was symbolised by Carole Vance’s influential book: ‘*Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*’ (1983), based on the Barnard conference in the US, and was a collection of essays, some of which were controversial due to their libertarian perspective but which also opened up a space for pleasure (in relation to sexuality particularly) to be talked about. The conference was central to what has been named the ‘sex wars’ between libertarian and so called ‘anti sex’ feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, who were opposed to pornography and prostitution, for example. Of course, these debates were not as polarised as has often been made out, and both sides were stereotyped and continue to be so (see Duggan and Hunter, 1995; Bronstein, 2011). But I recall finding myself wanting to talk theoretically about pleasure in a way which drew on the different voices in these so called ‘wars’, avoiding having to ‘take sides’, in an effort to make sense of mine and others everyday heterosexual sexual identities and practices. (See Califia, 1989 and Jeffreys, 1991, for instance, for very different views in this context.)

Indeed, my first case study here is centred around collaborative research on heterosexuality, which took the view that heterosexuality itself has long been seen as a taken for granted and invisible category and aspect of everyday life. Furthermore, a central tenet of the study was that empirical data was needed to be able to avoid and inform simplistic and polarising debates, from feminists and others, where the institution of heterosexuality was often conflated with an assumed homogeneity of what in actuality, were diverse historical and contemporary experiences of it. (See Jackson, 1999 and Richardson, 2000 for discussion of this.)

Along with the other researchers on the study, Jenny Hockey and Angela Meah, we were, to some extent, at different stages of the life course. Hence, the doing of the research from 2000-2002 and subsequent book on the ESRC funded project *Mundane Heterosexualities: From Theory to Practices* (2007), was a reflective time for us also, given the vicissitudes of our own (heterosexual and bisexual lives), with children growing up, relationships starting and ending and employment changing. The book was the first major study of heterosexuality across the life course. It widened out theorising on heterosexuality purely from its relation to the sexual and it was a happy experience in terms of three feminist researchers working together, as we all got on extremely well, and formed friendships between the three of us. This was connected, in part, to our feminist way of working, including alternating names on articles independent of who had done the most or least amount of work, and despite seniority, for example, which was our practice. The pleasures of actually writing where our voices often merged into each other, so we were unsure who had written what exactly, seemed an inevitable consequence of our researching together as feminists. But just as our personal lives were sometimes troubling for us in different ways, so too were some of the stories of the women participants, for instance, an account of ‘date rape’ or those narratives which signified a confusing lack of sexual knowledge for some of the women and men interviewed, as I go on to discuss. Yet, quite clearly, issues of agency and pleasure and their interconnection were also apparent.

The project was thus informed by this theoretical and personal historical context that I describe above, especially in relation to questions of structure and agency. Six focus groups were carried out which then informed life history interviews. These were carried out with family members from three successive generations in 22 East Yorkshire families, 72 interviews in total. Interviews were designed to focus on participants’ childhood contexts, their experiences of finding out about sexuality and relationships, their engagement with dating, coupledom and family formation, and also key life course transitions such as marriage, divorce and the death of a partner. They were also invited to reflect upon the ‘heterosexual’ lives of their other family members. The families in the sample corresponded to the differences between East Yorkshire’s rural population and Hull’s urban environment. Moreover, less than half these participants were married or cohabiting at the time of interview (see Hockey et al., 2007 for more detailed methodological information).

Therefore, data collected as part of this study concerning the making of modern heterosexuality in the East Yorkshire region of England, allowed the team to problematise feminist theorising that had often conceptualised heterosexuality as a monolithic and static category in which women (and men) are denied agency:

‘The post-1960s celebration of women’s sexuality did, however, find a mouthpiece within feminist writing. Anne Koedt’s (1972) ‘The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm’ and the work of sexologist Shere Hite (1976) encouraged women to reclaim their sexuality, arguing that sexual empowerment would increase women’s strength and confidence more generally (see Segal 1987, 1994). Retrospectively, however, Hawkes (1996) describes this shift as binding women more securely into unequal heterosexual relationships which advantaged male partners, good sex being something women were both capable of, and responsible for. Indeed, Jeffreys contends that sexual liberation never was in women’s interests (1990, 1994)’ (Hockey et al., 2007).

Via participants’ nuanced accounts of being and becoming heterosexual, we identified the existence of a multiplicity of heterosexualities. We also began to appreciate differences in participants’ meaning and experiences, whilst acknowledging the creative capacity that these women had to subvert the structural conditions they are often assumed to be subordinated to.

Sexuality and sexual practice have, therefore, long been argued to be the cornerstone of women’s subordination (see Jackson, 1999 and Richardson, 1996), and our data is rich with examples of mothers, daughters and grand-daughters ‘giving in’, as it were, to male sexual desires. Indeed, one of the researchers on the project, Jenny Hockey, in 2014 at the conference *Gendering Happiness: The Power of Pleasure*, Centre for Gender Studies, University of Hull, reflected that despite many years of researching bereavement and death, she found the data from heterosexuality project interviews ‘heavier’. Participants had evidently absorbed dominant ideas about what a heterosexual relationship should be like – the qualities of love and loyalty – the pleasures of romantic love and unflagging sexual interest – and much of the data concerned what we came to term ‘failed heterosexuality’, experiences that failed to conform to what people believed should happen – and the bitterness or guilt they experienced as a result. These data were depressing in ways that bereaved people’s accounts of some kind of survival were not. And if heterosexuality project interviewees did describe intense moments of romantic love or sexual passion, that too could weight on all the project researchers, if we then compared them with more mundane aspects of our own heterosexual lives – a reflexive response that reveals the potency of the happy-ever-after narrative.

Our central concern was with older women’s narratives. We argued that the diversity of their recollections made it difficult to interpret their heterosexual lives, practices and subjective experiences through those feminist ideas which stressed women’s subordination to the structural/patriarchal conditions, and that did not allow for any articulation of diverse pleasures. Our interviews with 60 women aged between 15 and 90 did speak of their sexual agency, interest in sexual matters and pleasure.

There were experiences recounted by women through their heterosexual narratives, aged 50 plus, who spoke both of sex as pleasurable, but also as something they pro-actively pursued both as younger women, and in their later lives. Thus, we argued that in recognising a diversity of heterosexual experiences, a more inclusive feminist politics which might speak to a wider group of women than previously, is made possible.

However, as we have argued (Hockey et al., 2007) the data also attested to older women’s invisibility and sexual marginalisation, though this was made very complex by our listening to the women’s voices across age and class differences, for instance, which revealed variation in their experiences. Therefore, women spoke of what would now be defined as ‘date rape’ and sexual and emotional violence within marriage, frustration with long term partners over issues such as housework and childcare, and dwindling sexual attraction.

However, we found that for some women, sexual interest had emerged in later life and had to be negotiated or renegotiated in relation to their male partners’ desires and sexual capabilities. Sixty-six-year-old Mo said of her wedding night:

*yeah [...] could’ve just laid there an’ left it in all night [...] which I ’ave done [...] could done then an’ all! [laughs] I [.] loved it in that bed with ’im [...] I’m just a sex kitten aren’t I, loved [.] no, I just loved to be near ’im, you know’.*

Another woman, Jean, recounted how her pleasure with her partner outweighed their guilt about having sex in their parents’ homes: ‘*I enjoyed it too much to feel guilty!*’ (2007, 58).

Considering some of the recent work on theorising happiness that I have referred to previously in this article, but in the light of this earlier research, has been very helpful to think through a retrospective analysis of the data collected – especially Cieslik’s (2015) focus on happiness as a social, processual and biographical phenomenon that involves agency and creativity, that is often experienced through its contrast with unhappiness. He does acknowledge the power and pervasiveness of dominant models of happiness, their oppressive nature, but argues that people do have the capacity to think outside them. Similarly, in relation to older people particularly, Laura Hyman (2014) empirically considers how people draw happiness and pleasure from their reflection on memories about the past, concluding: ‘The link between happiness and time is thus an important one. As individuals move through the life course, each life stage can bring vastly different daily experiences. Idealization of or nostalgia for the past can be thought of as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988) that adults of all ages employ to feel better about their lives as they move through life course transitions. They reflect upon experiences from prior stages of their lives, which they remember as being happy. Both time and age, then, must become key ideas in the growing subfield of sociology of happiness and wellbeing’ (2014, 8.4).

However, we found in our data that our participants, in reflecting on their (sexual) pasts sometimes used those reminiscences to construct a more agentic, and happier sense of self than in the past. Far from being idealised, as Hyman suggests, the past was a realistically appraised resource that allowed them to question unfulfilling current heterosexual relationships, or to appreciate how far they had come in being able to express and expect their own sexual desires, or need for independence to be met. Jean, an older woman born between the two world wars, said about her husband’s redundancy, when he had throughout their relationship been the breadwinner and she had subsequently gained full time work: ‘“…*from now on, I’m the breadwinner, so you can take over all my jobs […] including the cooking…and it’s not demeaning*”’. As we concluded in Hockey at al. (2007), this could be used as evidence to argue for seeing ‘Jean as an agent of change, working across the currents of heterosexuality’ (2007, 58). Even if not able to be interpreted as straight forward resistance, given the structural constraints of a hegemonic heterosexuality, we argued Jean could be seen to be experiencing heterosexuality as a ‘self-directed system of thought and practice’ (58). And, I would also argue, taking responsibility for creating the conditions of her own potential happiness.

However, we must not underestimate the potency of unhappy heterosexual experiences. For some of these older women, the sexual domination and use of their bodies by husbands or partners was an oft repeated narrative. The team found that the data from the project interviews weighed heavily on us, long after the interviews themselves had finished. Our participants had evidently absorbed dominant ideas about what a heterosexual relationship should be like – the qualities of love and loyalty – the pleasures of romantic love and unflagging sexual interest – and views on ‘failed heterosexuality’, experiences that failed to conform to what people believed should happen – and the bitterness or guilt they experienced as a result. So, when Ahmed (2010) writes: ‘Attributions of happiness might be how social norms and ideals become affective, as if relative proximity to those norms and ideals creates happiness’ (2010, 11), this can be applied with some conviction to the hegemonic heterosexual imaginary that Ingraham (1999) conceives of as being constituted by discourse, narratives, language, representations. However, as the data have shown, women’s diverse heterosexual practices and experiences also allow us to critique and problematise the structural institution of heterosexuality and assess any possibilities of agency within that, and a re-worked feminist concept of happiness can help further in that endeavour.

**Footwear, Happiness and Transitions**

My second ESRC case study (*If the Shoe Fits: Footwear, Identity and Transitions*, 2009-2013) was a more recent project, but still a collaborative one, on shoes and identity transitions. A particular issue for the team of Hockey, Dilley, Sherlock and myself, was the feminist challenge of working on an area associated with traditional gender identities. The red stiletto, for example, has become iconic, often made to stand for categories such as ‘woman’ and ‘femininity’. A key question for us, therefore, was should the project therefore be grounded in an active critique of the manufacture, marketing and consumption of women’s high fashion shoes? Further, how should we conceptualise and write about the pleasure women describe in relation to this kind of footwear, their desire for shoes of this kind, especially given previous feminist and historical associations of particular types of shoes with patriarchal and capitalist constraints (see Wolf,1991; Brownmiller, 1994).

In addition, we were keen to see shoes as being important to men’s identities, despite cultural stereotyping of shoes (especially high heels) being associated with particular kinds of femininity, and extend debates about footwear to shoes worn in different context such as leisure, work and across the life course. The importance of this endeavour has resonance with recent publicdebates around gender and footwear, for example, the recent case widely reported in the UK media in 2016, of the 27 year old woman working for a City firm in London, who was told to go home for not wearing high heels which were seen as inherent to her occupational performance. She later started a petition to have the issue of an employer’s right to determine an employee’s dress code in this way debated in Parliament. As well, in 2016, Labour MP Owen Smith was forced to apologise for reportedly saying he wants his party to 'smash' Theresa May, the UK Conservative Prime Minister 'back on her heels', a reference to her previous description in the media (in 2002) of her wearing ‘daring’ footwear of a pair of leopard skin kitten heels, when giving a speech.

As I have noted (Robinson, 2015), the empirical data on shoes from the project, has also explored the unhealthy effect of high heeled shoes upon women’s feet. This was revealed through the project’s relationship with podiatrists (see Farnsworth, Robinson and Nicholls, 2016), but also through listening to the women’s shoe narratives, some of which were testament to a very passionate desire to collect and wear high heels, but which also reflected the discomfort, and even pain they are prepared to suffer, whilst wearing such shoes (see Dilley et al., 2014). However, as I have argued: ‘Yet, macro-level theoretical interpretations too readily reduce women to victims of a male gaze…..So, if we perceive of the participants in the study as victims of oppressive gender hierarchies, we risk shoring up populist imagery that depicts women as helplessly insatiable consumers of whatever shoe designers choose to seduce them with’ (Robinson, 2015, 908).

The shoe project comes out of ideas about identity and transition – the argument that identity is processual, that we move between situated identities in everyday life and across the life course. (See Robinson and Hockey, 2011). There is a good amount of historical and semiotic work on shoes – objects to be looked at or objects that could somehow ‘say something about us’ - but the team wanted to add an understanding of everyday embodied experiences of shoes and their role in the process of identification. In popular culture, Cinderella, Puss-in-Boot and Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz are characters who all make shoe-based identity transitions – but they all have to put the shoes on their feet in order to somehow change their bodily experience of themselves (Hockey et al., 2013).

The study consisted of 12 focus groups with 80 people, including older people (over 65), young women, women who like shoes, young men, those with health/foot problems, a mixed sex bereaved group, rock climbers, men who like shoes, a group of parents and a group of Muslim women. The team also conducted in depth case studies with 15 participants, who all produced a ‘shoe key’ – this entailed a record of all the shoes they owned, how long they’ve had them, where they were bought, the brand, and where they were stored. There were two in depth interviews, the researcher, in addition, also accompanied them on a shoe-shopping trip and each participant kept a scrapbook which allowed them to reflect on shoes and their identities. All participants kept a ‘shoe log’ for 3 weeks and were filmed ‘doing’ everyday life, such as sports and leisure pursuits, being a DJ at a burlesque evening, at work, horse riding and walking, for instance. This data can, therefore, be used to interrogate some of the sociological debates around happiness. This also allows a development of an understanding of the data in new ways since the project ended, especially the project documentary film, *If the Shoe Fits*, one of the project’s outputs which I go on to discuss.

As I have already noted, Cieslik (2015) talks about happiness as concrete and grounded, as praxis or accomplishment. In so doing, he critiques interpretations that assume an over-socialised individual who – quite literally – buys into dominant discourses of happiness (i.e. narrow conceptions of beauty, success, wealth, love), and also buys into discourses that foster discontent – tethering individuals to patriarchal, capitalist projects. He’s interested in ‘critical moments and coping strategies’, and uses these ‘to explore how individuals manage(d) structural conditioning’. What he draws out from qualitative interviews with his own research participants is the idea of challenges either encountered (an accident) or chosen (education, employment) and he also examines the value system, the ethics, through which these challenges are reflected upon and the sense of well-being and experience of flourishing achieved by managing difficulties – that is, surviving periods of unhappiness.

The documentary we made was commissioned in order to disseminate our research and thus our theoretical thinking to wider audiences, and asked political, ethical and methodological questions – but uses narrative to support the train of argument. The stories it presents are those of two female participants who have either encountered challenges (a congenital foot deformity) or chosen them (refusing mainstream clothing and footwear). As they take us through their shoe lives, past and present, and periods of both joy and unhappiness across the life course, we get a sense of the power of dominant models of glamourous, heterosexual femininity – and the large scale availability and consumption of cheap fashion shoes for women. Furthermore, we hear the reasons why these might be problematic for the two women concerned. Through their shoe stories, both women certainly have found happiness - in the sense of well-being, or flourishing – through forms of resistance, albeit in very different ways, but also via the sheer pleasure of shoes as both a material object and object of desire.

Lizzie makes her own clothes and buys vintage and second-hand shoes. Talking about her love of vintage ‘brothel creeper’ shoes, she bemoans the fact that such shoes used to be a ‘*shared shorthand*’ for a collective identity, binding her to other, similar shoe wearers, but now they are available to everyone as an item for mass consumption. Yet, she continues to recreate her identity in relation to other types of shoes that she sources cheaply in second hand shops, giving her pleasure in both her own identity construction, but also in relation to the social interaction with other vintage shoe collectors at shared social events. Another interviewee, Sarah thinks her way out of the restrictions of NHS lace-ups and the belief instilled by her mother that she should ignore her feet. As she says: ‘*The state of your feet and what shoes you can wear has had a big impact on what I do’*. As a younger woman, she would never go to social occasions such as weddings, as she could not find fashionable *and* comfortable shoes to match her outfit. Taking part in the project allowed her to connect with her feet again, and see them as part of an embodied self, which she felt confident enough to experiment with. As a result, she not only buys fashion boots which she would not have contemplated purchasing before, thus changing her overall appearance, but also learns to walk more easily by allowing her brain and her feet to begin connecting with each other.

As the film shows, there is considerable evidence of the problem of happiness – fashion remains tied up with status and difference, including disability – and women are still prepared to suffer pain in order to impress other people. (Though whether these others are their female peers, for example, at the female only hard to wear high heeled shoe parties one participant held, or some kind of generalised male gaze remains debateable.) Yet the two women whose stories frame our film show evidence of feelings of well-being, their agency and creativity allowing them to flourish, and generate a sense of identity that makes them feel happiness. And, importantly for the research team, affording them to reflect on both the ordeal and frustrations of footwear choice and consumption but also the related pleasures they have experienced, albeit it in very different ways.

The data above allow us to, therefore, examine both views on femininity and its association with the mundane and assumed ‘trivial’ world of fashion, here specifically footwear, but also debates about consumption practices, especially in terms of how they are being used to inform current theoretical debates on happiness. In Robinson (2015), I concluded here that any relationship between shoes and identity as merely, for example, the outcome of unproblematic consumption practices, only supply but a literal reading of meaning and therefore uncomplex and partial understanding of what shoes mean for the individual. This does not recognise the mediating roles played by people’s relationships and their intersections across everyday life contexts which I explained through using a conceptual framework of the ‘meso level’. This is located in a place between structure and agency, where people contribute to and are influenced by, embodied interaction with friends and family, for example.

But a question which must be raised here, is whether some current sociological theorising on happiness is reproducing what could be argued are simplistic notions of the link between consumption practices, pleasure and happiness? Cieslik (2015) argues that: ‘I suggest that this neglect of happiness research is rooted in how sociologists often construct happiness as something that is predominantly a subjective, positive phenomenon that has emerged with the wider development of western modernity. Happiness tends to be seen as superficial, fleeting, emotional experiences, such as we see in the joy of shopping or pleasures of eating and drinking. Happiness then can be simultaneously banal and also linked to the problems of modernity – for example, our fixation on the ‘quick-fix’ highs of consumerism’ (2015, 422-23).

Utilising Bauman (2008) and Hothschild (2003), he outlines the current popularity of simplistic ideas about happiness, where the promise of happiness is seen as obtainable through quick fix consumption practices, and further, where happiness is also rendered problematic and meaningless through commodification.

However, his critique is that these views focus on the underlying ‘causal’ processes (values, power, socialisation) that can be seen to influence wellbeing. This then, ensures that we lack a more empirically grounded engagement with people’s everyday relationship to happiness which places happiness in a social and collective process that necessarily includes everyday decision-making, as people attempt to ‘flourish’ in everyday life. Yet, he does not acknowledge that is it these very ‘superficial things’ (such as, for my purposes, shoes as a material object) which in themselves can tell us much about happiness as a relational and collective process.

Later he states ‘…when asked about happiness people can provide banal, simple examples such as laughing and having fun, but when prompted will also offer more subtle, deeply felt narratives’ (2015, 430). As if somehow these deeper, more ‘authentic’ narratives are divorced from the ‘superficial’ pleasures and hedonistic attitude which have been seen to characterise individualistic consumption practices. He therefore successfully manages to critique theories on happiness and consumption for being causal, but does then not question or problematise this dichotomy he rather unwittingly creates.

Similarly, Bartram (2011) notes: ‘For example, some people believe that happiness is equivalent to pleasure (or the experience of pleasure)-but few if any happiness researchers would find value in a purely hedonic definition of happiness’ (2011, 3). However, the project team in subsequent work have argued against a simplistic reading of hedonistic pleasures in this way, with a focus on another type of footwear, the ubiquitous trainer. Even with a shoe which could, arguably, be currently seen as symbolic of a throwaway, fashion obsessed consumer culture, and as an international commodity, the relational and social context of wearing trainers makes it an extremely mobile object, thus rendering simplistic arguments about pleasure and unreflexive consumption practices to be debated (Hockey, et al., 2015). Thus, our participants’ trainer consumption and use was both perceived and experienced as core to their identity, and illustrated a capacity both to ‘fit in’ to specific roles, for instance, but also allowed for their agentic reinvention at times, as they took part in leisure activities, family relationships and creative re-making of selves.

**Conclusion**

As I have already noted, Laura Hyman (2014) in a study on the relationship between happiness and memory, sees that adults of different ages conceptualised reminiscing about the past as something by which happiness or pleasure was indeed attainable. Our participants in the footwear project also reminisced about long gone relationships, lost loves, and bereaved partners though their past consumption practices, and this was afforded through the supposedly ‘superficial’ and hedonistic purchase of shoes and shoe storage and wearing. There is, I would argue, no such thing as a ‘purely hedonic definition of happiness’, if we see such an object of material culture as the ‘shoe’ in the complexity of ways that I have described above.

Moreover, shoe buying and wearing allows the layering up of meanings and experiences over time for the consumer. The shoe might be a ‘flighty’ moment of self indulgence at the point of purchase. but the experiences undergone whilst wearing the shoe can give it meaning over many years. Further, even shoes that have been discarded can retain a powerful role in memory. Some of the women participants could be seen to be buying similar shoes to recreate earlier moments of pleasure and happiness (for, example, one middle aged woman purchased forty pairs of high-heeled shoes to recreate an earlier experienced femininity). Other, older women kept shoes that they could no longer actually wear, because they engendered happy memories.

Further, Jugureanu et al. (2014) argue that” ‘…we might reclaim ‘happiness’ as a properly sociological concern through its conceptual rehabilitation via more ‘relational’ formulations- as consisting of shifting human relationships, rather than simply ‘within’ these (2014, 7.4). This view then allows happiness to be theorised outside of more current psychological and individualistic discourses. In addition, the data on heterosexualities referred to above, attests to the importance of both a gendered and life course relational perspective on people’s (heterosexual) lives, if we are to be able to see happiness and its relationship to pleasure in more complex and nuanced ways. One that, in this case, also allows us to re-imagine theoretical conceptions of structure and agency within a dominant and patriarchal institution, that of hegemonic heterosexuality.

Thus, the relational and processual aspects of happiness - and how they intertwine- link both the cases studies discussed here. The evidence provided from them argues for a continued, imaginative theorising of happiness as an accomplishment that is achieved within social relationships and across the life course. In this way, key feminist and other debates can be re-invigorated and re-imagined.

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