

# **Group Pressures for Technological Mood Management: What's Wrong With Society Wanting Us to be Happy and Friendly?**

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## **Abstract**

The prospect of neurotechnologies for mood manipulation alarms some people who worry about the pernicious effects they might have. In particular there is a concern that individuals will be pressured to make themselves inauthentically happy, and tolerant of things that should make them sad or angry. The most common result of social pressures to adjust mood will likely be far more beneficial both for the individual and society. This essay reviews research on the stresses of "emotion work" and the personality correlates of "subjective well-being" to argue that social pressures will generally encourage individuals to be happy by encouraging them to be more friendly, patient, and engaged. Several more pernicious kinds of social pressures for mood control are then reviewed to illustrate the need for democratic scrutiny of the use of neurotechnologies, guided by a goal of encouraging an engaged, dynamic, flourishing personality in each citizen.

## **Introduction**

The concern that we are becoming a "Prozac nation" popping happy pills was a bit premature, given the emerging evidence that the efficacy of SSRIs like Prozac had been inflated by the suppression of clinical trial data. Nonetheless our growing understanding of the neurobiology of mood, and our expanding number of neurotechnologies – psychoactive chemicals, tissue engineering, gene therapy and implanted devices – mean that we will increasingly be able to control our moods. The first beneficiaries of our growing capacities for mood control have been people suffering from depression, anxiety and other disorders. But gradually these tools will make it possible for people who are not "mentally ill" to routinely be happier, calmer, more patient and more productive.

Two examples of drugs that appear to offer such rewards are oxytocin and MDMA. Oxytocin is a hormone released during romance, love making, child birth and breast-feeding which induces feelings of trust and bonding. Its use is now being explored to overcome social phobia (shyness) and facilitate the social

integration of people with autism (Baumgartner et al., 2008). MDMA or "ecstasy" is another drug whose users report feeling more love and compassion. Among other effects MDMA stimulates the release of oxytocin (Thompson et al., 2007). Clinical research is now being conducted on MDMA as a treatment for anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Shroder, 2007). Savulescu and Sandberg (2008) have proposed that drugs like oxytocin and MDMA could be used to enhance marital bonding.

One of the most common concerns about the prospect of such powerful mood control technologies is that various agencies of society will coerce individuals into use them to induce inauthentic moods with pernicious results (Walker, 2006). The alleged plucky individualism of our present age will then supposedly be replaced by brainwashed zombies who happily tolerate abuse and worship authority. This picture discounts the possibility that social pressures to adjust mood may have positive effects on both society and individual lives. This is likely to be the result if the kinds of emotions that society rewards support a flourishing personality and the ability to contemplate new life goals and achieve them. In this essay I will examine some of the likely positive effects of social pressure to adjust mood, as well as some of the potential negative scenarios.

## **Mood Manipulation**

First, it is important to remember that our capacity to manipulate our own moods, and social pressures to induce moods in us, are not new. Humans have been manipulating one another's moods since the emergence of human culture, and our more recent capacities for technological mood manipulation are continuous with a long history of social mood manipulation. Religious ritual, dancing, music, storytelling, uniforms, art and architecture are all intended to shape affect, sometimes towards happiness, social solidarity, joy, and awe, and sometimes towards darker emotions, anger and fear.

We are under pressure to conform our emotional displays with the demands of each situation or else face social sanctions, from friends, family and employers. We all learn to have, or at least appear to have, the appropriate emotions for social situations. Emotional nonconformity, such as laughing at a funeral or angry resentment at a celebration, is sanctioned.

One classic study of the pressure to manage emotions is Arlie Hochschild's (1983) study of airline stewardesses *The Managed Heart*. Hochschild describes the stress of the emotion management stewardesses are required to do to remain constantly cheerful and bright in the close confines of the plane. She notes three characteristic adaptations that stewardesses make to the expectation that they always be happy, each with its own downside. Some stewardesses identify with the always happy role, and attempt to adapt their inner life to the external smile. Hochschild suggests that this mode leads to burnout. Some are aware of the gap between their inner mood and their performance, and feel guilt that they are

unable to be as cheerful as expected. Still others are comfortable with the fact that their cheerfulness is just an act, but this leads to a sense of alienation from the job.

This kind of "emotional labor" and the problem of training caring and service professions to be emotional detached enough to avoid burn-out, but not so detached that they become alienated or ineffective, has been widely studied in fields as diverse as adventure guides (Sharpe, 2005), morticians (Cahill, 1999) and detectives (Stenross and Kleinman, 1989). The idea has also been extended to an examination of the "emotion work" that people do with family and friends, such as evincing interest in another person, apologizing after an argument, and showing affection (Hochschild, 1979; Erickson, 1993).

Many who work in the sociology of emotions adopt Hochschild's stance that there are long-term psychological risks and stresses from the pressure to manage one's emotions, to adjust one's mood to remain simultaneously emotionally detached while appearing helpful, pleasant and engaged. For instance organizational psychologist Dieter Zapf found recently that telephone marketers forced to remain pleasant on the job and endure customer insults suffered more long-term stress than those given permission to respond to angry people in kind (UPI, 2008).

In this context the prospect of mood management drugs or devices could be seen as possibly intensifying our alienation from our "authentic" feelings. But what if our capacity to induce mood actually makes us feel *authentically* happy through and through?

## **Happiness Set Point and Positive Affect Feedback Loops**

Like the sociology of emotions, the field of positive psychology and the study of comparative "subjective well-being" have grown rapidly in the last two decades. One commonplace observation in the "hedonic studies" field now is the idea that about half of the variation between people in our day-to-day subjective happiness is determined at birth by our genetics and neurochemistry, while the other half is amenable to positive and negative influence from upbringing, social circumstance, life events, and relationships. This initial brain setting is called the "happiness set-point" (Lykken, 1999; Weiss, 2008), and it places a strong constraint on how much we can modify mood with talk therapy, new friends or a different lifestyle. Whether you win the lottery or your house burns down you will drift back to your happiness setpoint in a couple of months.

The problem of the relative inflexibility of subjective well-being is compounded by the feedback loop that ensures that people who are generally congenitally happier will also have more of the life experiences that increase the variable environmental parts of life that effect happiness. Happier people are more successful in achieving social, work and life goals. Happier people are more likely to get and stay married, have more friends, belong to more groups, and are more

likely to volunteer. Happier people are more highly rated by their supervisors and they make more money. Happier people are also healthier and live longer (Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, 2005; Oishi, Diener and Lucas, 2007; Gamma, et al. 2008; Walker, 2006). Conversely, marriage, friends, wealth, success at work and health all make people happier. Disentangling the chicken and egg is difficult, but essentially the capacity for happiness is unequally distributed at birth and is then penalized or rewarded by society throughout our lives.

The happiness set-point is not the only part of our personality that is determined at birth. Many psychologists believe that personality is determined and characterized by five underlying factors, Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Thurstone, 1934). Each personality factor is also substantially determined at birth, with twin studies suggesting the inheritability of these five factors ranges from 40-60% (Jang, Livesley and Vernon, 1996; Bouchard and McGue, 2003).

These factors are correlated both with many kinds of social performance and with mood and happiness. High neuroticism and low agreeableness are correlated with unhappy relationships, conflict, abuse and divorce. High extraversion is correlated with making friends and having a happy marriage, and high conscientiousness and agreeableness is correlated with satisfaction in dating. Performance at work is correlated with high conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion and openness, and with low neuroticism. Extraversion and agreeableness predict volunteering in the community, and becoming leaders of community organizations. Extraversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness predict health and longevity (Ozer and Benet-Martinez, 2006).

The five factors are in turn related to happiness or subjective well-being (SWB). Neuroticism is negatively related, and extraversion and conscientiousness are positively related, to happiness (Hayes and Joseph, 2003). Some research suggests that all of an individual's happiness set-point can be accounted for by his or her personality set-points (Weiss, et al. 2008).

Perhaps, given this developing model of the role of personality in determining happiness, we can refine the question from "would it be a good thing for groups to pressure individuals to change their brains to be happier?" to "would it be a good thing for groups to pressure individuals to change their brains to be more open, conscientious, extraverted, friendly, and less neurotic, and thereby also to be happier?" Whatever the genetic and neurochemical bases of our happiness and personality set points turn out to be we will increasingly be able to control or permanently adjust them. Given that all the personal, group and social benefits that will accrue from this ability to adjust mood to better fit social expectations what might be some of the risks?

## **Risks**

## ***Inauthenticity and Self Sacrifice***

One objection to this benign model of social pressure on mood management would be that even if a person using mood management felt generous, patient and happy when taking care of a screaming child, angry customer or dying friend, that there might still be some level of deeper awareness of the inauthenticity of these surface feelings (Walker, 2006). This concern assumes that there is an authentic observer and emoter deep in the brain separable from the part of the brain feeling happy, an illusion that many of us experience. We may feel detachment from our emotions, observing ourselves feeling them but with the sense that there is a part of us above them. But this detached observer is dispassionate, not an authentic self roiling with anger, hatred, or craving. There is no inauthenticity because the division is between a feeler and an observer, not two different conflicting feelers.

For instance people who suffer from depression may have a sense of an internal observer which notes the depression, and then notes improved mood from treatment, or the manic phases of bipolar disorder. But this observer does not experience happiness despite the depression, or sadness despite the improvement of treated depression. Whatever emotional state we have, natural or induced, is the only authentic emotion we feel in that moment.

Perhaps however the disturbing inauthenticity of our feelings might surface if the mood management is not a continuous therapy. We might use mood management to react serenely to a challenging day at work, and then be disgusted when the therapy has worn off in the evening with our not having reacted with more anger or force. The gap between our normative expectations for our behavior and the behavior that we exhibit under mood management will vary. Some people will appreciate that when medicated they are able to keep their temper with family and co-workers, while others will consider their medicated behavior abnormal and inauthentic, harmful to their interests, authority and social status. The latter group may find the social pressures to apply mood management alienating, and may then choose to live with the consequences of noncompliance with social expectations. Walker (2006) makes this point in his essay defending "bio-happiness":

...proponents of bio-happiness would do well to concede to the critics that artificially creating happiness will not lead to authentic happiness for all. For if we understand 'authentic' as meaning 'in accordance with the values, goals and beliefs of the person', then it is clear that for some authentic happiness means living within whatever constraints one's genome dictates. ... (But) even if we allow that technology introduces an artificial happiness, at least in some cases there is good reason to suppose that the resulting happiness is authentic, and so in this sense, the happiness is real.

## ***Inappropriate Tolerance for the Intolerable***

Depending on which aspects of mood and personality are managed, and how, there is the possibility that mood control could encourage harmful self-abnegation and toleration of the intolerable. But chemical patience does not imply any less ability to recognize and redress bad situations. Even the normally happiest or most agreeable or extraverted people can recognize and resist illegitimate authority. Exercising anger management does not make one enjoy being yelled at at work, or disrespected by one's children.

On the contrary there are reasons to think that people who are managing their mood would be more effective at self-assertion and organized resistance. Happier people are in fact more assertive than sad people, and the depressed have the least capacity for self-assertion. An ability to suppress anger and remain patient generally makes people more effective in self-assertion and control. Agreeableness and extraversion increase the size of a person's social network and enhances their ability to mobilize social networks. The mood enhanced would be more effective calling the police on an abuser, or in organizing a consciousness-raising group, labor union or political party.

However precisely because mood management is likely to increase citizen and worker empowerment we cannot therefore discount the possibility of therapies designed only to give the user satisfaction in the performance of their allotted tasks, no matter how boring or degrading, without empowering side-effects. Although this is partly what Aldous Huxley implied about the totalitarian purpose of the drug *soma* in *Brave New World*, let us call this a "Sisyphus drug" after Jonathan Glover's (1984) thought experiment in *What Sort of People Should There Be?* Glover asks what would be wrong with a therapy that allowed Sisyphus to be delighted with his pointless, endless punishment of rolling a stone up a hill. The slave could be made happiest as a slave, and the abused wife could be made to delight in subordination and humiliation.

Even more troubling for the prediction of a generally benign social pressure to engineer mood and personality in the direction of engagement and flourishing is the observation that there will still likely be groups in the future which society can expect no benefit from, groups such as the structurally unemployed and the isolated disabled. The mood management pressures in their case might be only to encourage complete passivity, happy or not.

These two prospects, the Sisyphus drug and the use of mood management to enforce passive cooperation among the marginal, underline the need for a goal of a flourishing personality to govern \ public policy in general, and the regulation of neurotechnologies in particular. Even if the main tendency of pressures to conform mood to social expectations will be beneficial for individuals and society, there will always need for critical democratic scrutiny of whether the technologies are encouraging engagement, dynamism and assertion or passivity and stasis.

### ***Side-effects, Addiction and Health Risks***

Another risk is that the side effects of the mood management therapies might be unknown, and people would feel pressured to use them even though they have harmful consequences. One likely side effect is that any therapy that boosts mood is likely to be powerfully habit-forming. The therapy might have long-term effects on neurotransmitter function, the way that amphetamines and opioids do, so that mood falls below the original baseline after the drug is removed. This is not in itself a problem so long as the therapy, like caffeine, is inexpensive, widely accessible and has no other negative side effect or health risk. However if the habit-forming mood modifier poses a risk to health or impaired decision-making, like alcohol, regulatory scrutiny would have to be greater.

### ***Turning Up Greed, Aggression, Hatred***

A final concern about social pressure for mood management are the institutions which might have reason to encourage greed, aggression and hatred. Advertising is a form of social pressure which seeks to inspire feelings of inadequacy, greed and envy. The military and sports teams would like to tap and channel aggression. Churches have occasion to inspire fear and awe.

But all of these counterexamples are limited and temporary compared to the contrary pressures to encourage positive moods and a flourishing personality. More important to the military and sports than aggression in the field are capacities for emotional self-regulation, diligence, and teamwork. Churches are more concerned with encouraging temperance, agreeableness and group solidarity than fear of damnation. Advertisers may use the latest and most subtle forms of mood manipulation to encourage acquisitiveness and brand-bonding, but it is unlikely that consumers would acquiesce to pressure to permanently change their brain chemistry to be more unfulfilled with greater motivations to consume. On the contrary, mood manipulation is likely to reduce dysfunctional attempts to find happiness in material possessions.

## Conclusions

There are risks in a future in which individuals voluntarily manipulate their own moods and personality to adapt to the expectations of family, friends and employers. One serious risk is that we may learn how to improve mood by giving people great satisfaction with boring or abusive situations. People may turn to these kinds of mood enhancers because they represent a path of least resistance compared to the effort to actually change their situation. In fact, people already do this by adapting their expectations to their situations. One of the ironies of hedonic research is that some nations, such as Nigeria, are on average relatively happy, but only because they have such low expectations. We need constant vigilance, debate and scrutiny to ensure that neurotechnologies are not being used to adapt people to circumstances that should be changed, and thereby restrict human flourishing.

On the whole however it seems likely that social pressure will encourage us to use neurotechnology to be nicer, less shy, less neurotic and self-absorbed, more patient and temperate, and generally happier. Contrary to the worries of the Rousseauian skeptics that civilization requires the subordination of our true, untamed nature, that we will be miserable so long as our inner noble savage is in chains, civilization in fact has a powerful incentive to encourage our happiness and the flourishing personality. The main risks we need to be concerned with mood management technologies is whether they have been well-studied and are safe, inexpensive and widely available.

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