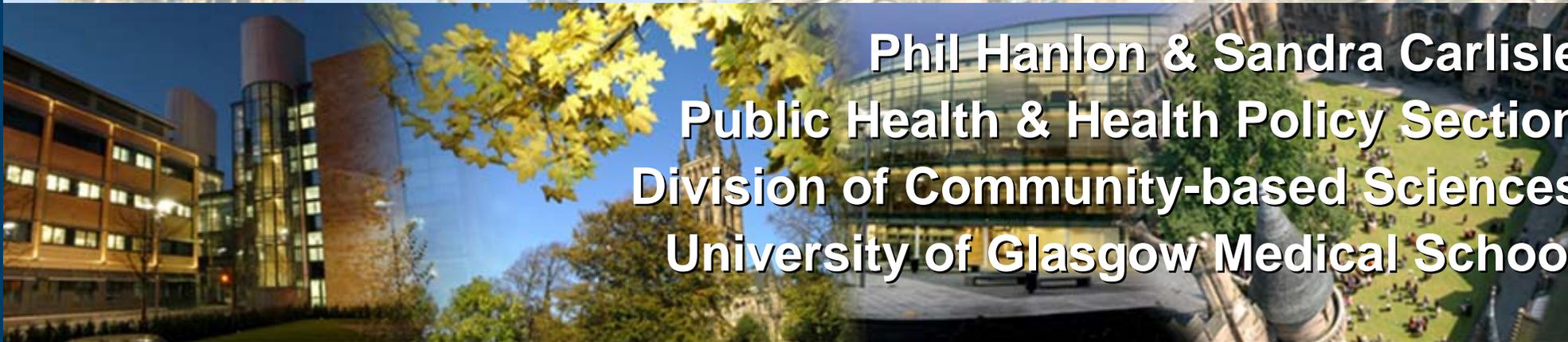


Wellbeing, culture and the language of consumption



Phil Hanlon & Sandra Carlisle
Public Health & Health Policy Section
Division of Community-based Sciences
University of Glasgow Medical School

Email: s.carlisle@clinmed.gla.ac.uk

➤ Wellbeing:

- (Some) findings from ‘the science’ of well-being (and what gets left out)

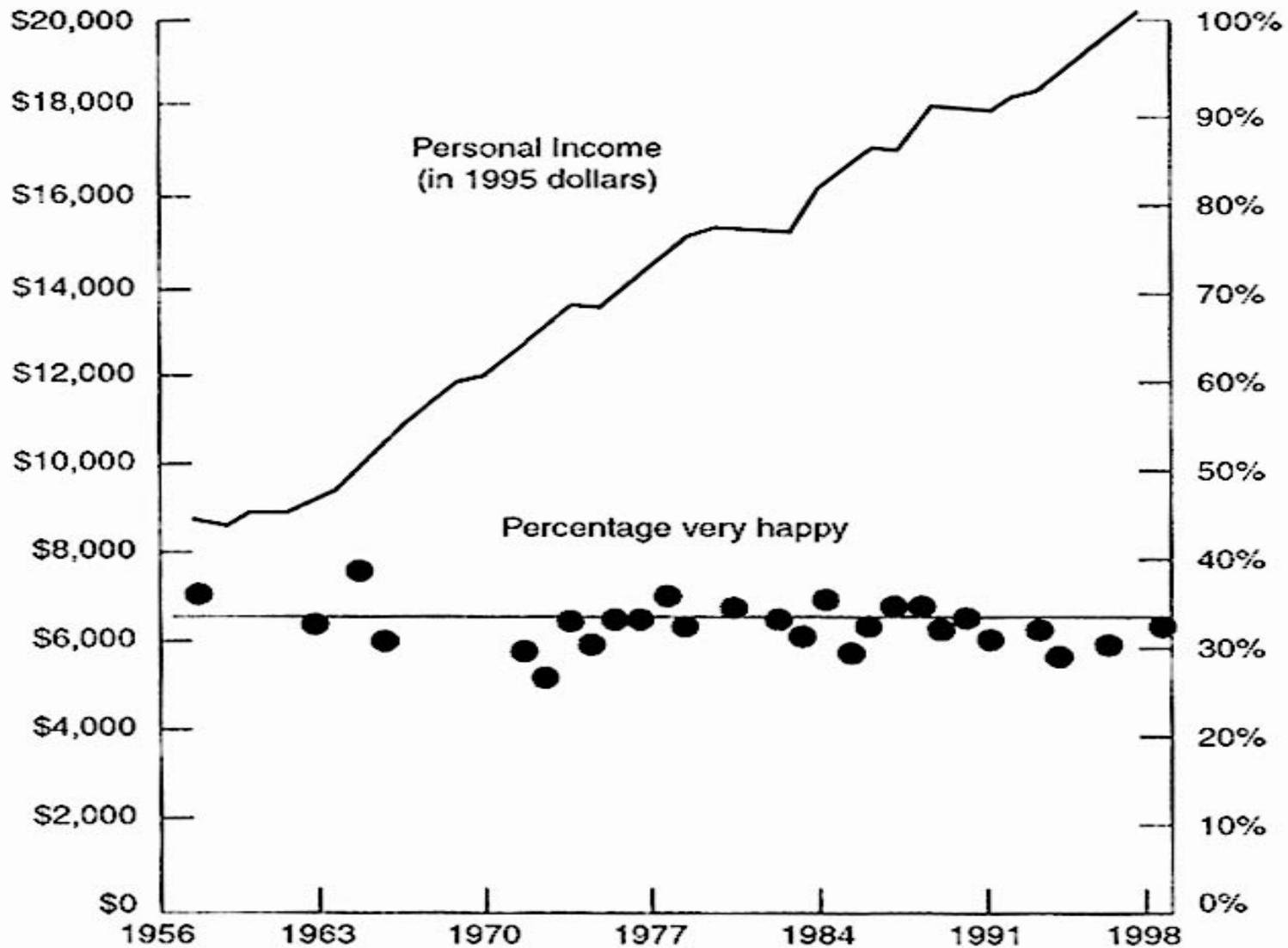
➤ Culture:

- The role of modern culture in wellbeing - consumption as ‘social conversation’

➤ Re-thinking the future:

- Why we need to protect wellbeing - facing an uncertain future
- From overconsumption to new thinking and real meaning

- **Heritability:**
 - Findings from twin studies put this at around 50% of wellbeing
 - Only 10% is attributable to material and environmental circumstances
 - Remaining 40% due to ‘intentional activities’, behavioural choices
- **Set point theory:** all human societies have a ‘set point’ for well-being (we are mostly above average and around 75%)
- **Adaptation theory:** humans adapt to most things, good or bad (except unemployment, loss of a spouse and mental illness)
- **Social comparison theory:** our well-being is relative to that of our reference group



(USA life satisfaction & personal income 1956-1998, Myers and Diener [1996])

Do people really know how they feel most of the time, and can they articulate this in reliable ways?

Maybe

Are people able to predict what will reliably bring them happiness and contribute to their wellbeing?

No

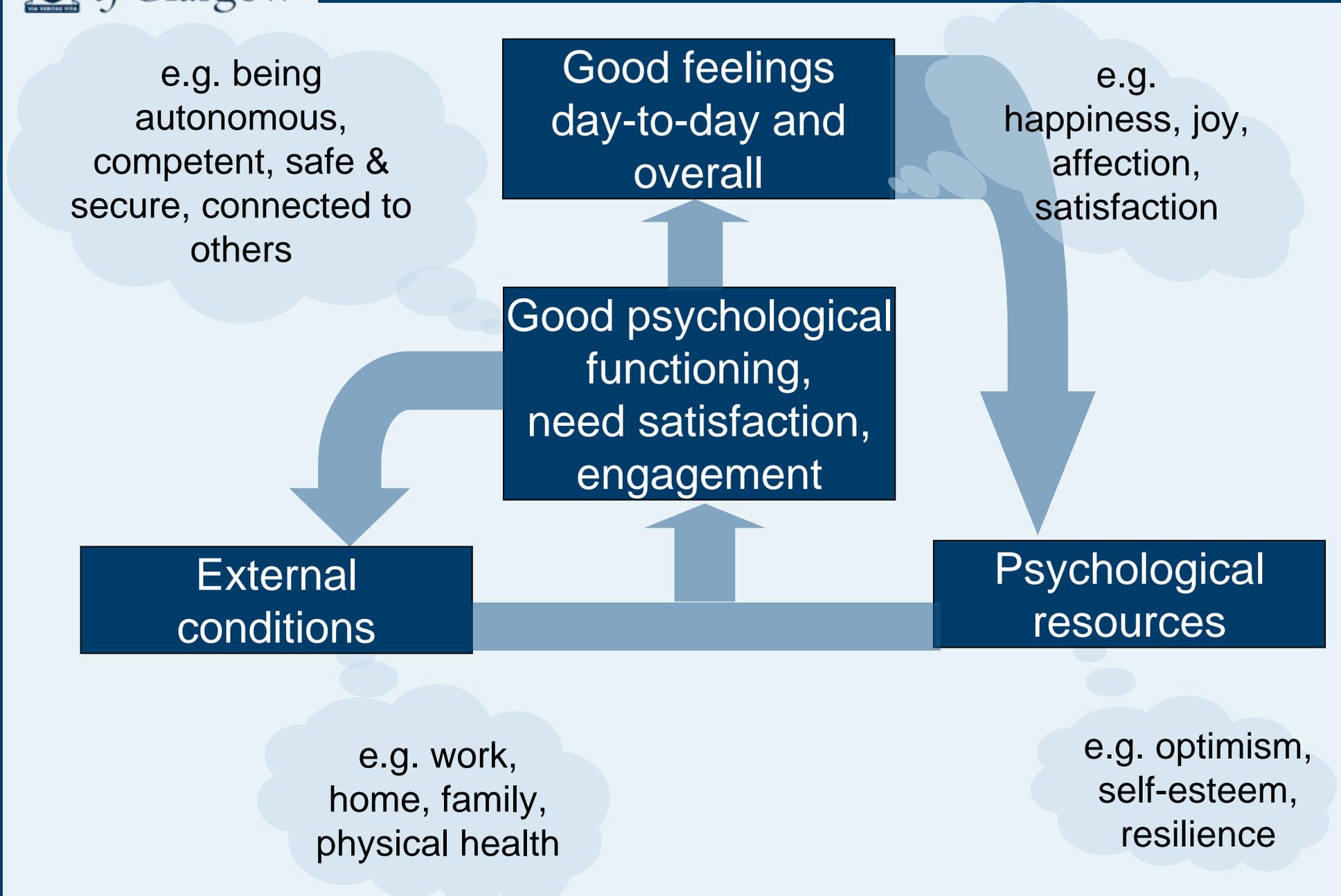
Happiness is not a goal but a consequence of how we live, found not by focusing on the self, but on others.

Happiness comes from balancing wants and means and from being content with what we have.

Happiness depends on our inner lives and the values we hold as much as on our external circumstances.

- ❖ Social inequalities in health (the gap and the gradient)
- ❖ Social inequalities in mental health problems
- ❖ Social determinants of health and well-being





“At higher levels of economic development, evolutionary cultural changes occur in which people place greater emphasis on self-expression and free choice, leading them to emphasise strategies that maximise their choice and, thus, happiness.”

(Inglehart *et al* 2008. Findings drawn from the World Values Survey and European Values Study)

Culture refers to the beliefs, values and meanings that we draw on in everyday life. These shape both how we see the world and how we act in it (though we are not always aware of this).

Culture is the learned knowledge we must possess to function adequately in our society.

It influences the goals we pursue *and* the resources we have available for doing so.



Pig's teeth necklace on a Big Man,
Papua New Guinea (high status)

Victorian housemaid's
dress (low status)





“People live in their own bubble, getting in their own car to drive to work, staying in their own home. Community spirit has gone and this compounds the issue. We’re all in debt. You’re stressed, you go to work, you go home. You sit in front of the TV. There’s no family dinner, no time to talk problems through, sort things out. You’re just working to afford that TV. There’s no time for your children when you come home at night. No time to talk.”

“It’s wider than just materialism. You want to do well and move on in order to get a better class of partner, a better standing in the community.”

(Prisoner group)

“People everywhere live busy, consumer-driven lives. Their energies are devoted to money, mortgages and there’s no time for emotional energy.

Parents round here want to be something, they’re conscious of material wealth and income and have worked hard to get here. They have more stuff, cars, washing machines – but they’re still dreadfully poor, because it’s relative. They know that educational qualifications are what allow you to make that step up so they push for results.

Their children are the same. It’s very much ‘I want to be a lawyer, doctor or dentist’. They’re very materially focused.”

(Headteacher)

“The economy depends on you being unhappy because you haven't got these things. So you have to work to buy them to be happy. If it wasn't for you being unhappy because of this, the economy wouldn't work.”

“In a third world society I would be a millionairess with money, a home, warmth. I'm low down in my society because I don't work and live on benefits.”

“It's symptomatic of a kindae society that doesn't value people but does value possessions. I think it may be that for a certain group of people it's becoming okay to sneer at the poor.”

(Mental Health Advocacy Group)

Fact

Consumption is meaningful and affects our wellbeing. Current levels of consumption in affluent societies are unsustainable.

Theory

Wellbeing is likely to be harmed by economic, social and environmental changes, unless we find positive ways to respond



Question

How can we adapt to inevitable change in ways which promote and sustain mental health and wellbeing for individuals and for society?

We need to move from:

- Narrow, simplistic self-interest
- Short-term enjoyment
- Intended consequences
- Money benefits
- Personal enjoyment
- Effects on ourselves
- Effects on our own communities
- Effects on individuals & communities

To:

- Comprehensive, enlightened self interest
- Long term enjoyment
- All consequences
- Physical and spiritual benefits
- Personal flourishing
- Effects on the human & natural communities to which we belong
- Effects on other human & natural communities
- Effects on the long-term projects that give meaning to our lives