



# BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

## RICHARD A. EASTERLIN

January 12, 1926– December 16, 2024

Elected to the NAS, 2002

*A Biographical Memoir by Kelsey J. O'Connor*

**RICHARD A. EASTERLIN** had a profound influence on his students, the research community, and the general public. Both a paradox and a hypothesis bear his name—remarkably, from two different fields—and remain influential more than fifty years after their introduction. The Easterlin Paradox, in particular, has gained wide public attention, challenging the orthodox economic view that economic growth improves people's perceived quality of life, that is, their happiness. There are now numerous, much-deserved tributes to him, including some written long before his passing and notably a 2017 special issue of *Review of Behavioral Economics* devoted entirely to him and his work.<sup>1–4</sup>

Richard Ainley Easterlin was born on January 12, 1926, in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. He earned a degree in mechanical engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology, New Jersey, in 1945 and then entered graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School (Penn). There he became an instructor in 1948 while conducting his doctoral research in economics under the supervision of Nobel laureate Simon Kuznets—who pioneered the concept of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Soon after completing his Ph.D. in 1953, Penn hired him as an assistant professor, and he advanced quickly, becoming an associate professor in 1956 and full professor in 1960. After four terms as department chair and more than thirty years at Penn, he moved to the University of Southern California (USC) in 1982. In 2018, at the age of ninety-two, he retired from teaching, explaining characteristically that he wanted more time for research!<sup>5</sup>



Richard A. Easterlin. Courtesy of the University of Southern California.

Part of Easterlin's success stemmed from his distinctive experience and research style. In addition to the positions above, soon after completing his Ph.D., he was invited to join the then-empirically-oriented National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) where he conducted research under Kuznets and renowned sociologist and demographer Dorothy Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Later, at the multidisciplinary Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, he was first introduced to happiness as a research topic. Collectively this multidisciplinary and empirically oriented experience gave us Richard Easterlin, the self-described “reluctant economist.”<sup>7,8</sup> In Easterlin's view, (economic) theory provides a starting point, but it should be continually refined with insights from other disciplines and empirical evidence.



In 1974, he published the seemingly contradictory findings that would come to be known as the Easterlin Paradox<sup>9</sup> (a term coined by Moses Abramovitz in 1979).<sup>10</sup> Specifically, at a given point in time countries with higher GDP per capita tend to be happier, but over time, growth in real GDP per capita does not correspond with long-run changes in happiness.<sup>11,12,13</sup> By “happiness” here and throughout the memoir I refer to “evaluative happiness,” which is one of three scientifically accepted forms of happiness or subjective well-being. The most common measure of evaluative happiness is life satisfaction, obtained from survey respondents’ evaluations of their satisfaction with life as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

The article was remarkable for several reasons. Using happiness data was revolutionary for economists, including Easterlin, at the time. In his youth, Easterlin had believed, as economics was/is taught, that research should be based on what people do, not what they say.<sup>15</sup> Self-reported data were not to be trusted. Comparing happiness scores across people also violated the prohibition against interpersonal comparisons of utility (which happiness proxied). Moreover, by showing that economic growth did not meaningfully increase happiness in the United States, he challenged economic dogma. Yet, despite some hostility and critiques from multiple disciplines, the Easterlin Paradox has largely withstood the test of time, albeit with refinements.<sup>16</sup>

The durability of the Paradox—and much of Easterlin’s work—can be attributed to his nature as a meticulous empiricist, whose chief aim was to give voice to the facts. He read broadly across disciplines, updated his views, and rigorously examined the data. In his 1974 article, he assessed the reliability and validity of happiness data and discussed the direction of causality. From my own experience, he once advised me against undertaking what would have been an interesting project because he deemed the data (from a reputable international organization) to be of insufficient quality.

Easterlin and his Paradox made it possible to study happiness as an economist. Although now well-known, his seminal article on happiness was difficult to publish.<sup>17</sup> At that time, happiness was not taken very seriously, even in psychology.<sup>18</sup> It was through the efforts of Easterlin and the other pioneers that empirical research on happiness gained legitimacy. Indeed, his initial 1974 article and first subsequent article<sup>19</sup> in 1995 have collectively been cited more than fifteen thousand times.

Easterlin’s contributions to happiness research extended well beyond the Paradox. In the 2000s, setpoint theory—which claimed individuals’ happiness rapidly and completely returned to an initial setpoint after life events—was widely accepted. If true, it would imply public policy could not meaningfully improve happiness.<sup>20</sup> Easterlin challenged this theory in his research and instruction. Applying a

demographic lens, he identified stable differences in happiness across population subgroups,<sup>21</sup> found happiness changes over the life course differently for men and women,<sup>22,23</sup> and showed marriage is associated with lasting increases in happiness.<sup>24</sup> In his first *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A.* article, he argued individuals can lastingly increase their happiness by prioritizing factors that are harder to compare or adapt to—such as family and health—over ever-rising income.<sup>25</sup>

Later, he explored the happiness impacts of communism and welfare state policy.<sup>26,27,28</sup> He found that national happiness can increase over the long term and that such increases were best explained by expanding welfare-state generosity, at least across ten European countries.<sup>29</sup> At his retirement conference in 2018, he introduced the idea of the “happiness revolution,” following the concepts of the industrial and demographic revolutions but instead rooted in social science developments.<sup>30,31</sup>

Before focusing on happiness in the 2000s, Easterlin made important contributions to economic history and demography. In a 1997 interview, he summarized his work as focusing on “long swings in population and the economy, the American baby boom and bust, the demographic transition (both fertility and mortality), the spread of economic growth, and the relation of economic growth to subjective welfare.”<sup>32</sup> For reference, his books and past tributes summarize much of his important work.<sup>33–38</sup>

The Easterlin Hypothesis (sometimes called the “Easterlin effect” or the “relative cohort size hypothesis”) illustrates some of this work. Developed over numerous publications beginning in 1961, it can be summarized as: “the relative size of a birth cohort determines the labor market outcome of that cohort, which in turn has repercussions on a host of socioeconomic characteristics, including fertility.”<sup>39</sup> This work also included the hypothesis that relative income determines behavior.<sup>40,41,42</sup> In developing this theory, he challenged orthodox economic assumptions about fixed preferences (e.g., regarding fertility) and drew from demography, psychology, and sociology. Since then, the hypothesis has been used to explain additional behaviors, including employment, education, and criminal outcomes.<sup>43,44</sup>

To his students, Easterlin emphasized critical thinking, data quality, and research design. In his happiness economics course—possibly the first of its kind—he led undergraduates to think critically about the evidence and encouraged them to question even seminal work. In his graduate economic history course, he stressed understanding historical context before developing a research design. Related lessons can be illustrated with the Paradox. Easterlin explained that rich countries are happier today not because they are richer, but because they were the first to develop the necessary policies

to support happiness. High income was not required to implement such policies, just as it was not required to implement certain health policies (e.g., sanitation).<sup>45</sup> He also showed when testing whether income and happiness are related over time, that researchers must consider the historical starting point and likely causal pathways—illustrated by post-communist countries, where rising happiness reflected multifaceted recovery rather than general trends common to the rest of the world.<sup>46,47</sup> As an example from his own research, he purchased approximately five new books on China when writing his second article on happiness in China only a few years after the first.<sup>48,49</sup> He also cautioned his students against analytical mistakes common even among senior scholars, such as inferring changes from cross-sectional data, which can only be used to infer differences between people,<sup>50</sup> or controlling for mediators, like health and income when studying the experience of aging, as if health does not decline with age.<sup>51</sup>

As one of his research assistants, I found his meticulousness was both inspiring and demanding. I created table after table, upon figure after figure, only to be told yet more were needed. What mattered most was the evidence, the story that the facts revealed, and a clear narrative and presentation. In our most recent work, Easterlin asked me to completely drop a chapter that had become too tangential. Yet he was also humble and always willing to listen. Collaborative work was just that: collaborative. And, as my fellow Easterlin-student friend fondly remarked, “Easterlin was never wrong.”

He built a community—sometimes intentionally and sometimes simply by being himself. In 2018, he designed his retirement conference to strengthen ties among happiness scholars. After his passing, Andrew Clark and Claudia Senik organized a memorial workshop in Paris in his honor. There and elsewhere, scholars were quick to share their positive experience with him, such as:

“He was always so supportive of me.”

“Although I had never met him, he took the time to write a well-thought-out and detailed response.”

“He was unexpectedly sharp for how old he was.”

“I will long remember him and his lovely smile.”

“He changed my life.”

As a Ph.D. adviser, he typically had three to four students at a time (in his later years), many of whom remain connected to this day. One asked me to include, and I echo, the sentiment: he invested time in us, even when it did not

necessarily benefit him. He helped us consider job opportunities, considering factors including but not limited to prestige. He cared about our lives and supported us even after retirement. He organized regular lunches for the whole team and deliberately avoided academic topics. He was razor sharp, caring, had a wide range of interests and a good sense of humor, and was a joy to spend time with.

His considerable contributions earned him recognition as a member of the National Academy of Sciences (elected in 2002), a Clarivate Citations Laureate (a distinction often preceding a Nobel Prize), and a Distinguished Fellow of the American Economic Association. He was a fellow of numerous prestigious organizations and served as president of the Population Association of America (PAA), the American Economic History Association, and the Western Economic Association International. He received honorary doctorates from Northwestern University (United States) and Lund University (Sweden), as well as prestigious awards such as the Irene B. Tauber Award from the PAA and the IZA Prize in Labor Economics from the Institute of Labor Economics. At USC, he received multiple teaching awards and the Faculty Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019.

He firmly believed that societies should prioritize happiness over economic growth,<sup>52</sup> and to his credit, this idea has gained traction. In 2011, a U.N. General Assembly resolution invited member states to use happiness to guide public policy.<sup>53</sup> Today, more than 70 percent of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries have implemented comprehensive frameworks to measure and report well-being.<sup>54</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, happiness has increased in a large share of countries since early measurement began,<sup>55</sup> and in some countries, we now have a clearer understanding of why.<sup>56</sup>

Reflecting on the impact of his 2021 book, and by extension much of his work, Easterlin said, “My hope is the same as it was for my undergraduates—that it may help to make people’s lives better.”<sup>57,58</sup>

Easterlin passed away on December 16, 2024, at his home in Pasadena, California, at the age of ninety-eight. He is survived by his wife, Eileen Crimmins; children Dan, Nancy, Sue, Andy, Matt, and Molly; and grandchildren Zack, Emma, Keaton, Tyler, Ryder, Owen, Ada, Enzo, and Clio.

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