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Professor Michael Argyle

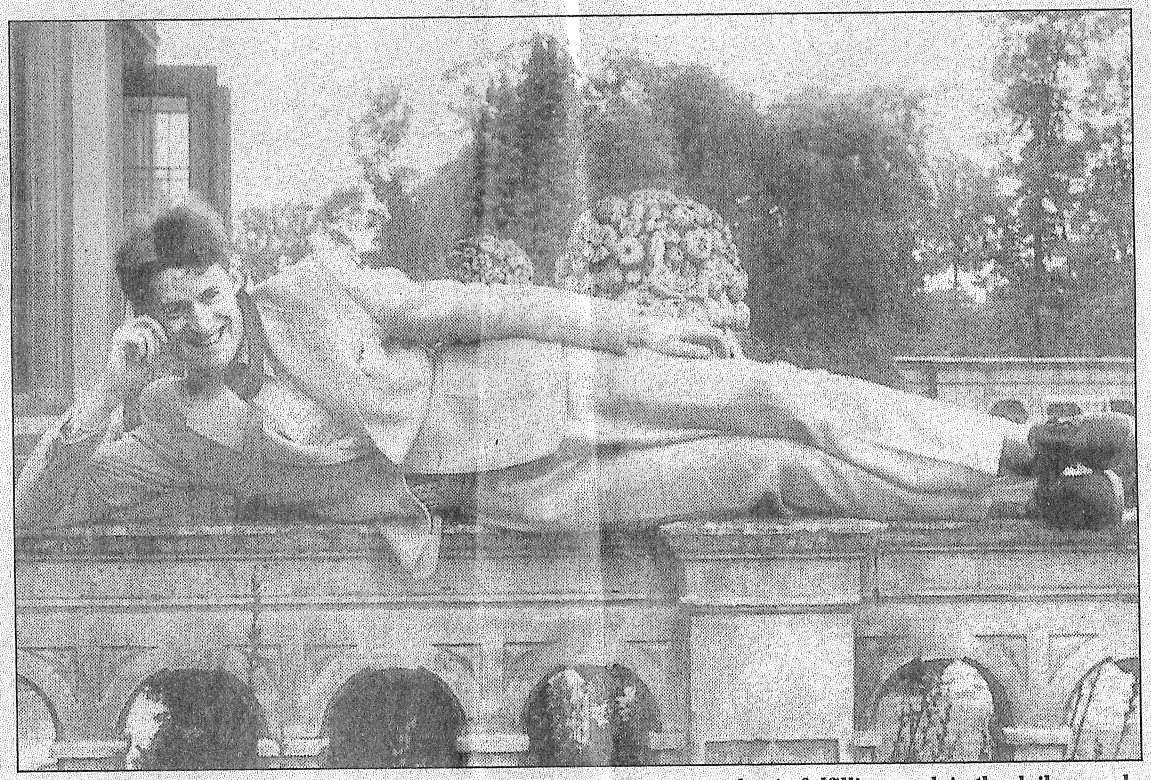
Social psychologist who studied happiness, and thought dancing, church and marriage the best prescriptions

PROFESSOR MICHAEL ARGYLE, who died last Friday aged 77, was a social psychologist noted for his studies of conscience, social skills and what makes for happiness.

Argyle began his work on "subjective well-being" in the mid-1980s after deciding that "psychologically, depression is a worked-out seam". After 15 years of research, he had concluded that a happy marriage was still the biggest single source of happiness, and that money and possessions rarely make you happier, except among the very poor.

For most people, he said, the best chance of happiness lay in skill in the daily round. To achieve contentment, people needed a fulfilling job pitched at a realistic level and, outside it, the pursuance of some all-absorbing private interest.

In 1996 he published *The Social Psychology of Leisure*, a book in which he put forward the view that, given the shrinking job market, the best guarantee of long-term happiness was "serious leisure"; that is, a hobby or activity that involves the "whole being". These could include reading, music, travel, art – or even housework, "so long as the individual finds the activity challenging or absorbing".



Argyle taking it easy in Salzburg (1951): believed that real contentment lay in fulfilling work in the daily round

According to Argyle, happiness has three components: positive emotions; the absence of negative emotions, such as anxiety; and a non-emotional component amounting to a general feeling of contentment or satisfaction with life.

Himself an enthusiastic Scottish country dancer, using statistical control groups he ranked dancing top of the list of activities most likely to elicit these states. But he did not share Shaw's view of the activity as the "perpendicular expression of a horizontal desire", nor did he obsessively analyse sexual behaviour. The next most likely marker for happiness was church, as much for the mingling with other worshippers as for the religious aspect, or any other activity that involved social contact, such as voluntary work, team sports or simply sitting around with friends.

Watching television was, he said, because of its essential passivity, one of the activities least likely to bring about happiness; on the other hand he pointed out that it was often the focus for family gatherings and that soap operas could produce a "sort of fantasy social life". In 1998, after more research, he went further: soap fans, he had found, were quantifiably happier than the rest of the population.

Michael Argyle was born at Nottingham on August 11 1925, the son of a teacher. After Nottingham High School for Boys he went up to Emmanuel, Cambridge, to read Mathematics. His studies were interrupted by the Second World War, during which he trained as a navigator for the RAF in Canada, and also worked as a fireman in the East End of London, helping to clear the damage caused by bombing during the Blitz.

When he returned to Cambridge after the war, he switched to Psychology; after graduating, he moved to Oxford to join the Institute (later the Department) of Experimental Psychology as a researcher and lecturer. Argyle remained there until his retirement, progressing to lecturer and reader within the university, and becoming a founding fellow of Wolfson College in the 1960s. During the 1970s, he also worked at the Littlemore Hospital, and on his retirement, was appointed Emeritus Professor at Oxford Brookes University.

In *Religious Behaviour* (1958), he revealed that 54 per cent of the people who "made decisions for Christ" at Billy Graham's evangelical meetings were still active churchgoers a year later. He was himself a devout Anglican, with High Church inclinations.

In 1961 he announced that thin and bony people had stronger "super egos"; that is, they had higher standards of conduct, were better able to resist temptation, and experienced stronger guilt feelings when they fell short of those standards. His research also showed that girls generally had stronger super egos than boys, and that, on average, middle-class people had stronger consciences than working-class people – although the amount of guilt felt was no guide to the amount of wrongdoing.

"We should come to regard guilt feelings as part of the personality to be lived with and to disregard those guilt feelings which we know to be caused by trivial acts of moral significance.

"We should also beware of behaviour we know to have evil consequences for others, but which does not happen to cause us any guilt. A possible example of this is drunken motoring, which, although illegal and extremely antisocial, appears to cause no guilt feelings whatsoever."

Conscience, he concluded, was that part of the personality that was soluble in alcohol. It was also stronger in people who had warm relations with their parents and whose parents were strict.

Next he led a team at Oxford engaged in a new study, "Social Skills", investigating the use of physical movements to put something across to another person in addition to speech. One of Argyle's tips was: "Ask open-ended questions, or use the sheer pressure of silence, or reward the other person with a smile or a nod". His team published a journal, which in 1966 included the results of a study that showed what had long been suspected, that the British recoil from contact with each other.

In a "field" study of couples sitting in cafes in different cities, the American professor Sidney Jourard found that in Mexico City the conversing couple touched each other approximately 180 times an hour, in Paris it was 120 times; in London it was nil.

Michael Argyle married, first, in 1949, Sonia Kemp, whom he had met while at Cambridge, and who died in 1999. They had a son and three daughters. He married secondly, in 2000, Gillian Thompson.