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Affective Component of Happiness



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Synonyms

[Affect balance](#); [Hedonic level of affect](#); [Mood](#)

Definition

Hedonic level of affect is how well one feels most of the time. In other words, the degree to which positive affect typically outweighs negative affect. Estimates of how well we usually feel figure prominently in the evaluation of our life as a whole and as such hedonic level is a component of happiness.

Description

“Happiness” is commonly understood as the subjective enjoyment of one’s life as a whole. When estimating how much we like the life we live, we

tend to use two more or less distinct sources of information: our affects and our thoughts. One can observe that one feels fine most of the time, and one can also judge that life seems to meet one’s (conscious) demands. These appraisals do not necessarily coincide. We may feel fine generally but nevertheless be aware that we failed to realize our aspirations. Or we may have surpassed our aspirations but nevertheless feel miserable. Using the word “happiness” in both these cases would result in three different kinds of happiness, the overall judgment as commonly denoted with the term and these two more specific appraisals of life. To mark these differences, Veenhoven (1984, 2009) distinguishes between *overall happiness* and *components* of happiness and, among the latter, an affective component called “hedonic level of affect” and a cognitive component called “contentment.” This conceptualization is at the basis of the World Database of Happiness. In this lemma, the affective component of happiness is described in more detail. The cognitive component of happiness is described in the lemma contentment.

Concept

Hedonic level of affect is the degree to which various affects that someone experiences are pleasant in character. “Pleasantness” or “hedonic tone” is an experiential quality that exists in all human affects and probably also in animals. We experience both positive and negative affects, the former typically more often

than the latter. Hedonic “level” is the degree to which positive experiences dominate over negative experiences. In that sense, the concept is close to Bentham’s (1789) famous definition of happiness as “the sum of pleasures and pains.”

A person’s average hedonic level of affect can be assessed over different periods of time: an hour, a week, a year, as well as over a lifetime. The focus is mostly on “characteristic” hedonic level. That is so to say, the average hedonic level of affect over a long time span such as a month or a year. The concept does not assume subjective awareness of that average level.

Measures

Measurement of hedonic level of affect requires an estimate of how well a person feels most of the time.

Self-Estimates

This is mostly done using self-estimates; typically a respondent answers a single question such as “How is your mood these days? Very good, good, not too good, or bad?”

Affect Balance Scales

Another way of questioning is to ask people whether they have experienced particular affects in the recent past, both positive and negative affects. For example, “Did you feel . . . proud (yes/no)” and “Did you feel . . . rejected (yes/no).” Then a balance score is computed on the basis of the responses, which indicates the degree to which an individual’s positive experiences outweigh negative ones. Examples of such sets of questions are the 10-item Bradburn’s (1969) Affect Balance Scale (ABS) and Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988) 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). All these measures require the respondent to have the ability of retrospection, and for that reason, these methods are not suited for use with young children and the demented elderly. Even among able respondents, these measures are vulnerable to bias in recall, such as the peak-end effect.

Average of Multiple Moment Assessments

Recall of earlier experience is not required in multi-moment assessment of affective experience, such as the experience sampling method (ESM), in which people record their mood of the instant when sent a signal to do so at random times. Recall of at least the previous day is required in diary methods, such as Kahneman et al.’s (2004) Day Recall Method (DRM). In this method, people first reconstruct what they did yesterday and next rate how they had felt during each of the activities. All methods involving multi-moment assessments measure hedonic level using the average of affect ratings during a particular period.

Behavioral Indications

Unlike cognitive “contentment” with life, hedonic level can also be measured using nonverbal cues, such as frequency of smiling and body posture. This requires systematic and repeated behavioral observation, preferably in different situations. Behavioral observation also forms the basis of peer ratings of affect.

All measures of hedonic level of affect are listed with code “A” (for Affect) in the collection “Measures of Happiness” (Veenhoven 2012a) of the World Database of Happiness, which provides full details of questions or rater instructions.

Findings

The above-mentioned collection of Happiness Measures also provides links to studies that have used particular measures of hedonic level of affects and to the findings obtained with these measures. Two types of findings are discerned: distributional findings, that is, how well people feel, and correlational findings, that is, factors that go with feeling more or less well.

Distributional Findings

Many of these studies draw on representative samples of the general public in nations, and the results are gathered in the collection “Happiness in Nations” (Veenhoven 2012b) of the World Database of Happiness. To date, the largest set of findings covers 133 nations using a 14-item scale of affect balance for the previous day (Veenhoven 2012c).

Affect balance appears to be above neutral in all of today's nations, though not equally much so everywhere. In Ethiopia, positive feeling outweighs negative ones by 14%; in Iceland, it is by 66%. Hedonic level is currently highest in Western nations and in Latin America and low in African nations and in former communist nations. Hedonic level of affect in nations is not always paralleled by cognitive contentment, for example, in Africa, contentment is low, but the affect level is medium (Rojas and Veenhoven 2013).

Correlational Findings

Hedonic level typically goes with the same factors as overall happiness and contentment do. Correlations are more pronounced with health and with social participation. Some studies show a slight negative correlation of hedonic level with age, while the correlation with contentment is mostly positive (Veenhoven 2012d). The correlations between hedonic level of affects and overall happiness are not equally strong in all nations; in striking the balance of their life, Americans give more weight to how they feel than Asians currently do (Suh et al. 1998).

Explanation

Why do we feel good or bad? Probably because that informs us about how well we are doing. Affects are an integral part of our adaptive repertoire and seem to be linked to the gratification of human needs. In this context, "needs" are seen as vital requirements for functioning, such as eating, bonding, and exercise, without which we cannot survive. Nature seems to have safeguarded the meeting of these necessities with affective signals such as those of hunger, love, and zest. In this view, a positive mood signals that all needs are sufficiently met at the moment. In this theory, "needs" are distinct from "wants" and are assumed to be inborn and universal, while "wants" are seen as acquired and will therefore vary across cultures. However, wants can coincide more or less with needs.

Function

We experience various specific affects all the time, much of which generalizes in "mood." Specific

affects are typically linked to specific things, such as hunger is to eating, but in the case of mood, there is no clear object; we feel good or bad without knowing why. As such, hedonic level can be seen as an affective meta-signal that tell us how we are doing on the whole. In this view, negative and positive moods function as red and green lights on the human machine, indicating either that there is something wrong or that all systems are functioning properly. If so, this is likely to have behavioral consequences, with a negative mood urging to caution and a positive mood encouraging one to go on. There is lot of research to support this prediction.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Contentment](#)
- ▶ [Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Happiness Measures](#)
- ▶ [Need Theory](#)

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