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Contentment



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Synonyms

[Getting what you want](#); [Goal-achievement gap](#);
[Meeting aspirations](#); [Satisfaction](#)

Definition

Contentment is the degree to which one perceives one's wants are being met. It involves a cognitive judgment in which perceptions of life as it is are compared with notions of how life should be. This estimate of success in meeting wants figures in the overall evaluation of one's life. In this context it is referred to as the "cognitive component" of happiness.

Description

The term "contentment" is often used as a *synonym* for "happiness" and is then used to denote our subjective satisfaction with our life as a whole. Yet

the term is also used in a more specific sense for a *component* of happiness. This lemma is about that specific use of the word "contentment."

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 ones (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, an overall judgment commonly denoted with the term happiness and two more specific appraisals of one's 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 forms the basis of the World Database of Happiness. In this lemma, the cognitive component of happiness is described in more detail. The affective component of happiness is described in the lemma Affective Component of Happiness.

Concept

Contentment is the degree to which a person perceives that his/her aspirations are being met.

Michalos (1985, p. 404) calls this the “goal-achievement gap.” The concept presupposes that an individual has developed conscious wants and has formed an idea about the realization of these wants. Whether this idea is factually correct does not matter; the concept concerns the individual’s perception.

When individuals assess the degree to which their wants are being met, they may look both backward and forward and estimate what life has brought them up to now and what it is likely to yield in the future. Timeframes are likely to differ across persons and situations.

Measures

Unlike hedonic level of affect, contentment can only be measured using self-reports. An outside observer cannot see what a person wants from life and how successful that person perceives to be in meeting his or her wants. Self-reports can be elicited in several ways.

Simple Global Self-Estimates

The matter can be addressed in single direct questions, such as the following: “How successful are you in getting what you want from life?” A drawback of this approach is that respondents may not have a clear idea of what they want and therefore rather report how they feel. This problem is addressed in several ways.

Guided Global Self-Estimates

One approach is to bring goals to the awareness of the respondents using priming questions. In that vein, Kilpatrick and Cantril (1960) start with open questions on what respondents imagine to be the “best possible” and “worst possible” life. They then presented a 0–10 ladder scale to respondents and ask them to imagine that the top of the ladder represented the best possible life as they have just described and the bottom the worst possible life. As a last step, they ask respondents to rate their own present life on that “self-anchoring” scale. This measure is often used and is coded C-BW (contentment, best- worst) in the collection Measures of Happiness (Veenhoven 2021a).

Goal-Wise Estimates

Another approach is to have respondents first list their goals in life and next ask them to rate their success in realizing these. Contentment is then measured as average success, eventually weighed with ratings of importance. Measures of this kind are coded C-ASG (contentment: average success in goals) in the collection “Measures of Happiness” (Veenhoven 2021a).

Findings

Application of these measures in various surveys has yielded a lot of findings, both distributional findings, that is, how contented people are, and correlational findings, that is, things that go with more or less contentment. Much of these findings are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2021b, Findings by Measure type).

Distributional Findings

The above-mentioned question on how one’s present life rates between the best and the worst possible has been used in 140 nations. Average ratings on the 0–10 ladder range between 3.2 in Togo and 8.0 in Denmark. Contentment is low in poor nations and more so than hedonic level of affect. Africans in particular rate their life close to the worst possible, but do not feel too bad. A similar pattern appears in Latin America where contentment is at a medium level, while the level of affects is high. A pattern of high contentment and high affect prevails among Western nations.

Correlational Findings

Studies at the individual level within nations show the expected links between contentment and common aspirations, such as having a spouse, a job, and a good income. Contentment also correlates with age. Although we do not feel better when getting older, we tend to become more contented. One of the possible reasons for this is that our aspirations are lowered in old age.

Explanations

There is much theorizing about how people set goals and assess their success in reaching their goals. Theories differ with respect to the standard

of comparison used as well as to the time perspective adopted.

Social comparison theory emphasizes comparison with other people. One of the problems with this explanation is that it is commonly difficult to establish, which people serve as a “referent,” and whether the comparison made is upward or downward. Life course analysis emphasizes an individual’s personal situation as a point of reference and assumes that we compare with what we had earlier. Equity theory rather stresses that we compare with what we deem to be fair. Michalos (1985) integrates much of this thinking in his “Multiple Discrepancy Theory” (MDT).

Several of these theories assume “reference drift,” that is, changes in standards of comparison following success or failure. In this line, a common theory is that we want more the more we get and therefore remain equally contented. This theory is known as the “hedonic treadmill,” a classic description of which is found in Brickman and Campbell (1971). This theory forms the basis of another classic thesis, the “Easterlin paradox,” that holds that economic growth does not make us any happier since our subjective standard of living follows at an equal pace (Easterlin 1974).

In this pool of explanations, one can always find one that explains a particular finding post hoc. Yet prediction on this basis is more difficult, since it is difficult to get a view on the hierarchy of goals in people’s heads and on the variations in standards they use in different contexts.

Functions

Most animals can evaluate their life only on the basis of affective experience and the same holds for little children. Adult humans can also evaluate their life using reason and comparing their life as it is with notions of how they want their life to be. This is likely to facilitate adaptation in several ways. An obvious function is that it informs us how well we are doing with respect to our goals. Since evolution has stripped most behavioral instincts from the human genome, we need self-set goals to direct our behavior and the pursuit of these goals requires monitoring of our progress, which stimulates innovative behavior. Thereby, it also helps us to keep going and to meet the universal need for self-actualization. When it comes

to success in generally shared goals, contentment also informs us about how well we are doing compared to other people, which appeals to our universal need for esteem. Rayo and Becker (2007) argue that we are preprogrammed to compare and go for the better. Yet the phenomenon can also be seen as a consequence of other needs and the human social condition. In this latter view, the tendency to keep track of one’s success in meeting one’s wants is universal, but not inborn.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Affective Component of Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Need Theory](#)
- ▶ [Social Comparison](#)

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