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Happiness

Ruut Veenhoven
Erasmus Happiness Economics Research
Organisation, Erasmus University Rotterdam,
Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Optentia Research Group, North–West
University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

Synonyms

Affect balance; Contentment; Enjoyment of life;
Life satisfaction; Subjective; Sum of pleasures
and pains; Well-being

Definition

The degree to which a person evaluates the overall
quality of his/her own life as a whole positively. In
other words, how much one likes the life one
lives.

Description

Concept of Happiness

The word "happiness" is used in various ways. In
the widest sense, it is an umbrella term for all that
is good. In this meaning, it is often used inter-
changeably with "well-being" and denotes both
individual and social welfare. The word is also
used in the more specific meaning of "a subjective
enjoyment of life," and it is on this meaning we
will concentrate in this lemma.

Happiness is defined as *the degree to* which an
individual judges the overall quality of his/her
own life as a whole favorably. In other words,
how much one likes the life one leads. This defi-
nition is explained in more detail in Veenhoven
1984:22. This definition forms the basis of
Veenhoven's World Database of Happiness
(Veenhoven 2020).

Components of Happiness

When assessing how much we like the life we
live, we draw on two sources of information:
how well we feel most of the time and to what
extent we are getting what we want from life.
These sub-appraisals are referred to as "compo-
nents" of happiness, respectively, an affective
component called *hedonic level of affect* and a
cognitive component called *contentment*. These
components are discussed in separate lemmas in
this encyclopedia.

Scientific Literature on Happiness

There is a large body of philosophical literature on
the good life in which happiness in this sense is
sometimes addressed, though seldom systemati-
cally analyzed and certainly never researched
empirically. Empirical research on happiness
emerged in the twentieth century, the first study
dating from 1911. All the research reports are
listed in the Bibliography of the World Database

of Happiness, which listed 15000 publications in Januari 2920 (Veenhoven 2020a). The findings of empirical research on this kind of happiness are gathered in the finding collections of the database; next to collections of distributional findings (Veenhoven 2020c, d) is a large collection of correlational findings (Veenhoven 2020e).

Measurement of Happiness

Since happiness is defined as something we have in mind, it can be measured using questions. An overview of questions used to measure happiness is available in the collection "Measures of Happiness" of the World Database of Happiness; to date, it includes about 900 variants (Veenhoven 2020b). Measurement issues are discussed in more detail in the lemma "Happiness Measures" of this encyclopedia.

A commonly used question on happiness is as follows: "Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please answer by ticking a number between 1 (dissatisfied) and 10 (satisfied)." This question has figured in many survey studies all over the world, and it has been answered by more than a million people.
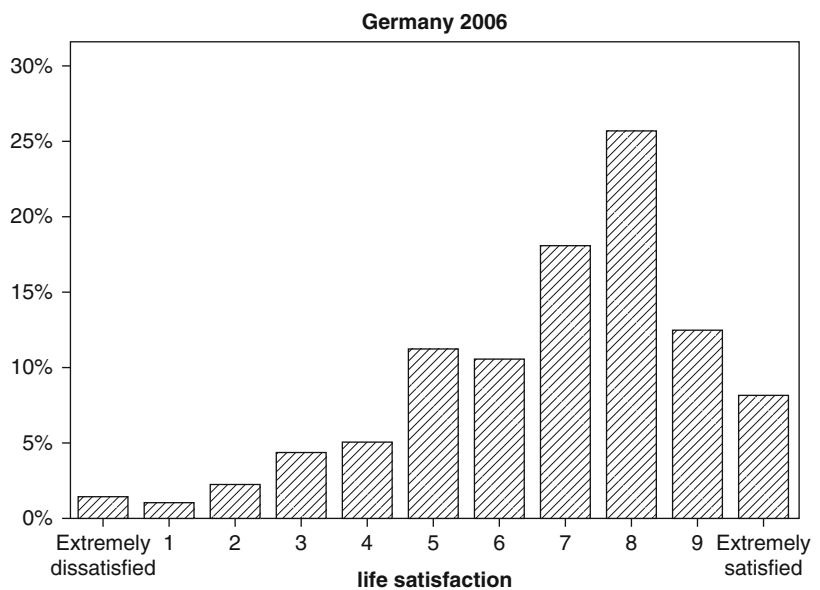
Happiness in Nations

An example of responses to the above question asked in Germany is given in Fig. 1. Responses differ widely across nations. In 2020, the *average* score on this 0–10 scale was 8.3 in Denmark but only 3.8 in Tanzania. Most of these differences can be explained by variation in societal characteristics, such as economic development, rule of law, and trust in people. People clearly live happiest in the most modern nations in today's world. Ongoing modernization is coupled with a gradual rise in average happiness in most nations.

There are also differences in *dispersion* of happiness in nations. In 2020, the standard deviation on this 0–10 scale was 1.4 in the Netherlands and 3.0 in Yemen. These differences are also linked to societal development. Inequality of happiness tends to be lower in modern nations and has declined in these nations since the 1970s.

Scores on level and dispersion of happiness in nations can be combined to obtain an index of *Inequality Adjusted Happiness*, which is described in a separate lemma in this encyclopedia. Scores on average happiness in nations can also be combined with estimates of longevity to obtain an index of *Happy Life Years (HLY)*, which is also described in a separate lemma.

Happiness,
Fig. 1 Happiness in Germany

Data on all these indicators are available in the collection "Happiness in Nations" of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2020c).

Happiness in Publics

In addition to the data on happiness in the general population in nations, there is considerable data on happiness in specific populations, such as children, pensioners, medical patients, and criminals. These data are gathered in the collection of "Happiness in Publics" of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2020d).

Some illustrative findings are as follows: Happiness tends to be lowest around the middle of life. Married people are happier than singles, but couples with children are not happier than childless couples. Happiness is strongly related to personality, but unrelated to IQ. Religious people are happier than nonbelievers in most countries of the world, but not everywhere.

Correlates of Happiness

Numerous researchers all over the world have looked at differences in individual happiness within countries.

Social Position Because most of the studies into individual differences in happiness have been inspired by egalitarian social policy, the emphasis is often on social differences, such as in income, education, and employment. Contrary to expectation, these positional differences have little bearing on happiness, at least not in modern affluent society. Together, positional variables explain, mostly, no more than 10% of the variance in happiness. A summary of the main findings of these studies is given in Table 1.

Life Ability The strongest correlates of happiness are found at the psychological level; happy people are typically better endowed with capabilities than the unhappy. The common variance explained by such variables tends to be around 30%. Some main findings are summarized in Scheme 6. Much of the findings on individual variation in happiness boil down to a difference in *ability to control one's environment*, and this pattern seems to be universal. An overview is presented in Table 2.

Happiness, Table 1 Happiness and position in society: summary of research findings

	Strength of correlation within *western nations*	Similarity of correlation across *all nations*
Social rank		
Income	+	+
Education	±	+
Prestige	+	+
Social participation		
Employment	±	+
Memberships	+	+
Primary bonds		
Married	++	+
Children	0	?
Friends	+	+
	++ = strong positive	+ = similar
	+ = positive	± = varying
	0 = no relation	– = different
	– = negative	? = not yet investigated
	? = not yet investigated	

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of Correlational Findings Veenhoven (2020e)

Causal Path

Having established that people differ in happiness, the next question is why. Various factors are involved: social institutions and individual behavior, simple sensory experiences and higher cognition, stable characteristics of the individual and his or her environment, as well as freaks of fate. A tentative ordering of factors and processes is presented in a sequence model in Table 3. In this model, the assumption is made that the judgment of life draws on one's flow of life experiences, particularly on positive and negative experience. The flow of experiences is a mental reaction to the course-of-life events. This includes major one-time events, such as marriage or migrations, as well as repetitious mundane events, like getting up in the morning and doing the dishes. The events that happen in life are partly a matter of good or bad luck, such as accidents. The occurrences of life events also depend on given

Happiness, Table 2 Happiness and life abilities: summary of research findings

	Strength of correlation within *western nations*	Similarity of correlation across *all nations*
Proficiencies		
Physical health	+	−
Mental health	++	−
IQ	0	+
Personality		
Internal control	+	+
Extraversion	+	+
Conscientiousness	+	?
Art of living		
Lust acceptance	+	+
Sociability	++	+
	++ = strong positive	+ = similar
	+ = positive	± = varying
	0 = no relation	− = different
	− = negative	? = not yet investigated
	? = not yet investigated	

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of Correlational Findings Veenhoven (2020e)

conditions and capacities. Traffic accidents are less frequent in well-organized societies and among attentive persons. Thus, the chances of "rewarding" and "aversive" events are not the same for everybody. This is commonly referred to as "life chances." Present life chances root in past events and chance structures, in societal history, and in individual development.

An example may serve to illustrate this four-step model: A person's life chances may be poor because he/she lives in a lawless society, is in a powerless position that society, and is personally neither smart nor nice (Step 1). That person will run into many adverse events. He/she will be robbed, duped, humiliated, and excluded (Step 2). Consequently, that person will frequently feel anxious, angry, and lonely (Step 3). Based on this flow of experience, it is reasonable to assume that the person will judge their life as a whole negatively (Step 4).

Consequences of Happiness

Prophets of penitence say that happiness spoils, among other things, because unhappiness drives activity and creativity. Yet, empirical research

Happiness, Table 3 Evaluation of life: a sequence model of conditions and processes

Life chances	Course of events	Flow of experience	Evaluation of life
Quality of society			
Economic welfare			
Social equality			
Political freedom			
Cultural lush			
Moral order	*Confrontation with*:	*Experiences of*:	*Appraisal of average affect*
Etc.	Deficit or affluence	Yearning or satiation	
Social position	Attack or protection	Anxiety or safety	Comparison with standards of the good life
Material property	Solitude or company	Loneliness or love	Striking an overall balance of life
Political influence	Humiliation or honor	Rejection or respect	
Social prestige	Routine or challenge	Dullness or excitement	
Family bonds	Ugliness or beauty	Repulsion or rapture	
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	
Individual abilities			
Physical fitness			
Psychic fortitude			
Social capability			
Intellectual skill			
Etc.			
Conditions for happiness		**Appraisal process**	

typically shows positive effects of happiness, such as greater involvement in activities and better health. Many of these findings are condensed in the "broaden-and-build theory" (Fredrickson 2004). An overview of the literature on consequences of happiness is available in the Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven 2020a).

Pursuit of Happiness

Much of the research on happiness is prompted by the hope of finding ways to promote greater happiness for a greater number of people; however, several theories about happiness imply that improving our living conditions will not make us any happier. One such theory is that happiness is relative; another is the theory that happiness is a trait. Both theories have been tested and have been rejected. Another comforting finding is that average happiness in nations can be as high as 8 on a 0–10 scale. If this is possible in these surveyed countries, it should also be possible in other nations.

Cross-References

- ▶ Affective Component of Happiness
- ▶ Contentment
- ▶ Databook of Happiness
- ▶ Eudaimonia
- ▶ Happiness Adjusted Life Years
- ▶ Happiness Measures
- ▶ Happy Life Years (HLY)
- ▶ International Happiness Scale Interval Study
- ▶ International Well-Being Index
- ▶ Livability Theory
- ▶ Quality of Life
- ▶ Quality of Life (QOL), an Overview
- ▶ Satisfaction with Life as a Whole
- ▶ Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), an Overview
- ▶ Subjective Happiness Scale
- ▶ Subjective Indicators of Well-Being
- ▶ Subjective Well-Being (SWB)
- ▶ Temporal Satisfaction with Life Scale (TSWLS)
- ▶ Well-Being, Philosophical Theories Of
- ▶ World Database of Happiness

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