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World Database of Happiness

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Synonyms

Collection of research findings on subjective
enjoyment of life; Finding archive on happiness;
Tool for research synthesis on happiness

Definition

The World Database of Happiness is a focused
finding archive (Veenhoven 2020). The concep-
tual focus is on subjective enjoyment of life as a
whole. This concept is defined in detail in
(Veenhoven 1984) The archive contains standard-
ized descriptions of research findings on this mat-
ter, which can be sorted on subject, population,
and several methodological features. The data-
base is available on internet at https://worlddata
baseofhappiness.eur.nl.

Description

The Problem

Social scientists are producing an ever-growing
stream of research findings, which is becoming
ever more difficult to oversee. As a result, capital-
ization on earlier research investment is declining,
and the accumulation of knowledge is stagnating.
This situation calls for more research synthesis,
and today, interest in synthetic techniques is on
the rise. To date, attention has been focused on
techniques for meta-analysis, with little attention
paid to the preliminary step of bringing the avail-
able research findings together. What we need is
(1) techniques that can be used to describe
research findings in a comparable way, (2) a sys-
tem for storing such descriptions in an easily
accessible archive, and (3) a system to which
research findings can be added on a continuous
basis (Veenhoven 2009).

The Tool

The World Database of Happiness is an example
of such a tool. It is tailored to meet the require-
ments for assembling research findings on happi-
ness, both distributional findings (how happy
people are) and correlational findings (what things
go together with happiness). With its focus on
"findings," the system differs from data archives
that store "investigations" and from

bibliographies that store "publications." As yet there is no established term to describe this tool for research synthesis. I call such a tool a "findings archive" (Veenhoven 2020).

Building Blocks

The basic elements of the database are *pages*, which are linked in various ways. "Pages" are organized in *collections*, from which *reports* are generated. "Reports" are bunches of pages on a particular subject. This makeup is presented graphically on Fig. 1.

Pages

Four kinds of pages are involved: (1) pages on a particular publication, (2) pages on a particular study, (3) pages on a particular measure of happiness, and (4) pages on a particular research finding. All these pages use a standard format and a standard vocabulary.

Collections

The above-mentioned "pages" are gathered in "collections." The World Database of Happiness has four such collections: (1) the Bibliography of Happiness, (2) the collection "Measures of Happiness," (3) the collection of "Distributional Findings," and (4) the collection of "Correlational Findings" (see Fig. 2).

Reports

Selections of "pages" are assembled automatically from each of the above-mentioned "collections" and presented in "reports." Two kinds of reports are particularly useful in research synthesis: (1) "publication reports" and (2) "finding reports."

Publication Reports Reports of this kind list the publications on a particular subject, using the subject classification of the Bibliography of Happiness. Unlike the "finding reports" mentioned below, these publication reports cover all that is written on the subject, not only research reports but also literature studies and theoretical treatises. Among the research reports mentioned, the publication reports do not limit to publications on studies that used acceptable measures of happiness. These also contain publications on studies that are not included in the finding collections. As such, publication reports provide a complete overview of the literature, which is helpful for narrative research synthesis.
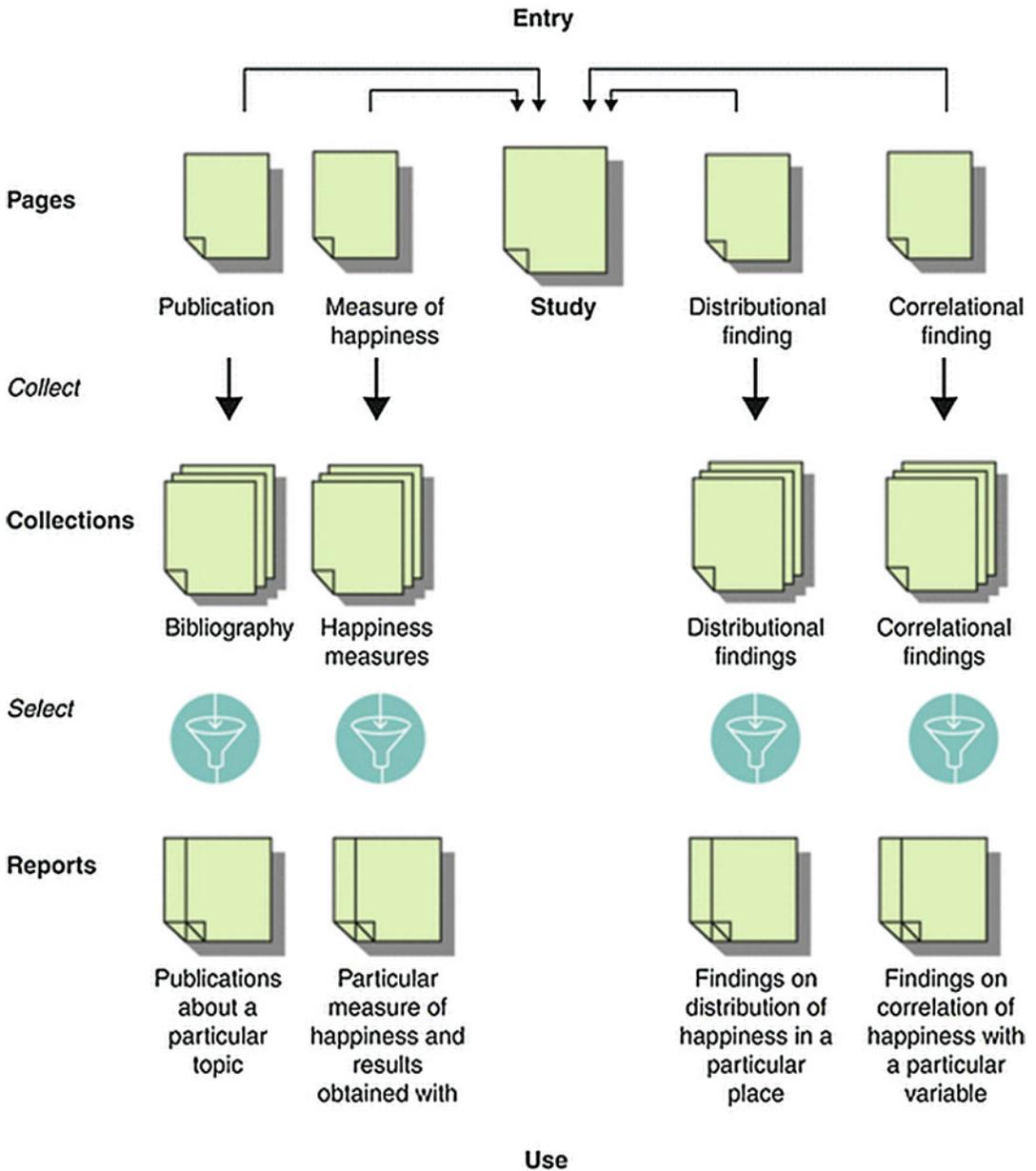
Finding Reports Reports of this kind are more focused and limit to empirical observations yielded using an accepted measure of happiness. The direct link to an overview of all the finding reports is https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/findingreportslinkpage.htm.

Nation Reports These reports present an overview of observed distributions of happiness in the general population in nation states. The reports limit to findings in representative samples of the general population. These findings are ordered by the kinds of happiness measure used and by year within these blocks.

Rank Reports These reports draw on the above nation reports and select findings yielded using the best comparable measure of happiness. Nation ranks are presented in four separate reports on (1) *average happiness* in nations; (2) *inequality of happiness* in nations, as measured using the standard deviation; (3) *inequality- adjusted happiness*, which is an index combining mean and standard deviation; and (4) *happy life years*, which is a combination of average happiness and life expectancy.

Trend Reports These reports also draw on the above-mentioned "nation reports" and focus on the ones that involve repeated responses to the same question over the years. Trend reports are limited to countries for which at least 15 such data points are available over a period of at least 20 years. To date, there are 14 such cases. As with the above "rank reports," there are four kinds of "trend reports" on happiness in nations, on change over time in (1) *average happiness*, (2) *inequality of happiness*, (3) *inequality- adjusted happiness*, and (4) *happy life years*.

Reports on Correlational Findings on a Specific Subject These reports assemble finding pages on

Entry

World Database of Happiness, Fig. 1   Building blocks of the findings archive

the same subject, using the main topics in the subject classification of that collection. To date, there are 104 such reports in the database, some of which contain more than a hundred finding pages, such as the report on "income," which contains to date 921 correlational findings. Reports on correlational findings start with a subclassification of the available findings in this subject category and enumerate the number of findings in each of these categories. This subclassification follows a standard categorization into (1) *overtime* correlations, for instance, the relation between earlier income and present happiness (this category is labeled "development"); (2) *same- time* correlations, such as the association between present income and present happiness (this subcategory is labeled

World Database of Happiness, Fig. 2 Start page World Database of Happiness by November 2020

as "current"), and (3) *attitudes* to the subject matter, rather than the subject, e.g., the observed correlation between income satisfaction and happiness.

Reports on Happiness in Special Public This kind of report gathers both distributional findings and correlational findings observed in a specific public, other than the general population. The findings are not presented as such, but the reports present links to these.

Current Contents of the World Database of Happiness

On November 2020, the database listed about 15,000 publications on happiness, of which about half reported an empirical investigation based on an acceptable measure of happiness. It contained about 37,000 finding pages of which 17,000 were about distributional findings and 20,000 were about correlational findings.

Functions of the World Database of Happiness

The main function of the archive is to facilitate *continuous accumulation of knowledge* on happiness, by providing a structure to which new research results can be added and on which periodical synthetic studies can be done.

The database also facilitates *preparation* for research synthesis by 1) describing research findings in a standard format and terminology, 2)

homogenizing statistics as far as possible and 3) sorting the findings by subject and methodology.

The database allows for a new way of *presentation* of research findings in a review paper. Using links to online finding pages, a lot of information can be condensed a few tabular overviews. Applications of this technique a found with Jantsch and Veenhoven (2019) and Veenhoven et al. (2021).

Although originally developed as a stand-alone project at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the World Database of Happiness has developed into an international *documentation center* for empirical happiness research, to which scholars all over the world can add. Colleagues can join the project as a *research-associate*. They can then enter their own findings and/or take responsibility for keeping a part of the archive up-to-date, such as by entering all the findings on happiness gathered on a particular subject or in a particular country. More detail about the role of associated researchers is found here.

Usage of the World Database of Happiness

Since its launch in 1998, the website of the World Database of Happiness has attracted about 1.4 million visitors, as can be seen here. By November-2020 a search in Google Scholar yielded 3.400 hits, about half of which seem to denote active use of the findings. The use of this database as an online appendix in synthetic papers is rather new. A listing of research syntheses using the findings archive is given in here. https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/this-database/uses-of-this-database/

History

The database started as a series of reference books, within 1984 the first "Databook of Happiness." Separate books named "Bibliography of Happiness," "Happiness in Nations," and "Correlates of Happiness" were added in the early 1990s. The database became available on a website in 1998, and its development is ongoing with data being added as it becomes available.

Cross-References

▶ Databook of Happiness

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