

World Database of Happiness: Uses for comparing across cultures

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ABSTRACT

The World Database of Happiness is an online archive used to store the results of empirical research on happiness in the sense of life satisfaction. Findings are described in a standard format and terminology in electronic 'finding pages', each of which has a unique internet address. Findings can be sorted by place and time and allow comparison across times and places regarding 1) how happy people are, 2) determinants of happiness, and 3) consequences of enjoying life or not.

Keywords: *research synthesis, cross-national, subjective well-being, World Database of Happiness*

WHAT IS THIS WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS?

The World Database of Happiness is an online archive of research findings on subjective enjoyment of life. It brings together research findings that are scattered throughout many studies all over the world. The archive stores standardized descriptions of research findings on happiness which can be sorted in several ways. This system differs from bibliographies that store publications and data archives that store investigations. The archive provides an easy-to-access overview of the available research findings on happiness and prepares them for analysis. As the method is new, there is no common word for it. I call it a *findings-archive*. The technique is described in Veenhoven, Buijt & Burger (2022).

Aims

The archive prepares research findings for synthetic studies, narrative reviews as well as quantitative meta-analyses. It facilitates the comparison of research findings across time and nations and eases the accumulation of available knowledge. The technique serves to cope with the following problems of research integration, a) chronic confusion of tongues, b) growing mass of research findings, c) scattered publications of findings in different locations, and d) selective reviewing and retrieval of findings.

Conceptual focus of the archive

Happiness is defined in the database as the *subjective enjoyment of one's life as-a-whole*. In other words: how much one likes the life one leads. Synonyms are 'life satisfaction' and 'subjective well-being'. Within this concept of *overall happiness*, two 'components' of happiness are discerned: an affective component called the *hedonic level of affect* and a 'cognitive' component called *contentment*. These components are seen to function as subtotals in the overall evaluation of life. This conceptualization of happiness is delineated in more detail below and in the introductory text to the Bibliography of Happiness, Chapter 2¹.

Selection of publications

All publications that use the word 'happiness' or related words in the title, abstract or contents are identified and inspected for fit with the above concept of happiness. This involves a lot of reading; since the start of this project in the 1980s, some 30,000 publications have been inspected. Publications that pass these criteria are entered in the Bibliography of Happiness, which held some 16,000 titles by August 2023. Happiness is not always the central issue of these publications and neither is it always called by the same name. The eldest empirical study in the archive (Webb 1915) referred to hedonic level of affect as 'the general tendency to be cheerful'.

Selection of empirical studies

If a publication reports an empirical investigation, the next step is to check whether the measure of happiness used in the study fits the above definition of happiness adequately. This selection for *face validity* is described in Chapter 4 of the World Database of Happiness². During the selection process, many measures fail that test; many questionnaires purportedly dealing with happiness measure broader phenomena, such as 'positive mental health' or satisfaction with particular 'domains of life' rather than satisfaction with 'life as a whole'. Studies that involve at least one acceptable measure of happiness are included in the collection of studies from which findings will be entered into the archive. By August 2023, the archive held some 17,000 studies which together yielded about 50,000 findings.

Basic elements: Finding pages

At the heart of the archive are electronic pages that summarize a research-finding, using a standard format and terminology. Two kinds of findings are involved: 1) distributional findings, that is, observations on the spread of happiness in a particular population, and 2) correlational findings about the degree to which things other than happiness go together with happiness.

¹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Introtext-Bibliography-Chapter2.pdf>

² <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/Introtext-MeasuresOfHappiness-Chapter4.pdf>

Distributional findings

A page of this kind describes how happy people are in a particular population, as observed using a particular measure of happiness. Next to the frequency distribution, the page reports two summary statistics (mean and standard deviation) and the 95% confidence interval around these. An example of such a page on a distributional finding is given in Chart 1.

Correlational finding

This kind of page contains the description of the observed statistical association between happiness and something else (called a ‘correlation’) in a particular sample and using a particular measure of happiness.

It consists of three parts: the name by which the correlation is called in the original research report, detail about their measurement and classification by subject matter in the database’s Taxonomy. Description of the observed statistical association with happiness involves the following elements: the *statistics* used for quantifying the degree of association and for assessing statistical significance and the values obtained in the study. Particular elaborations and specifications are also noted. An example of a page with a correlational finding is shown in Chart 2.

The database further includes standardized descriptions of scientific publications on happiness, studies reported in these publications, measures of happiness used in these studies and *statistics* by which findings are quantified.

Collections

The above-mentioned ‘pages’ are gathered in four related collections: 1) a focused bibliography, 2) a collection of valid measures of happiness, 3) a collection of distributional findings on happiness, and 4) a collection of correlational findings on happiness.

*Bibliography of happiness*³

This collection includes scientific publications on happiness as defined above, even if this subject is only a side issue. The collection is continuously updated⁴. It involves journal articles, books, dissertations, conference papers, and unpublished research reports. By August 2023 it held some 16000 titles. Included publications are classified by the main subjects addressed using a fine-grained classification⁵.

*Measures of happiness*⁶

This collection holds measures of happiness that have passed a test for face validity. By August 2023, it included some 1000 measures of happiness, mostly single questions varying in the

³ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/collections/bibliography/what-is-this-bibliography-of-happiness/>

⁴ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Introtext-Bibliography-Chapter3.pdf>

⁵ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Introtext-Bibliography-Chapter4.pdf>

⁶ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/collections/measures-of-happiness/what-is-this-collection-measures-of-happiness/>

phrasing of the lead item and response options. These measures are sorted by a) the happiness variant addressed and b) technical variations such as the response scales used. This is to allow comparison across findings based on measures of happiness that are identical or at least equivalent.

*Distributional findings*⁷

This collection holds observed responses to questions on happiness in different populations as expressed in the mean and standard deviation. By August 2023 the collection held some 24,000 findings on how happy people were at different times and in different places. In the classification of these findings, a distinction is made between happiness in the general public in nations and happiness in special demographic groups, such as students, housewives, or medical patients.

*Correlational findings*⁸

This collection holds findings on things that correlate with happiness, both at the micro-level of individuals and at the macro-level of nations. By August 2023 the collection included some 24,000 such findings. These many findings are ordered using a fine-grained subject classification⁹.

Reports¹⁰

Findings on happiness in nations are also gathered in nation reports that include all distributional and correlational findings ever observed in the country¹¹. Findings on happiness in nations are further sorted through periodical rank-reports¹² which list nations by the level of happiness, and trend reports¹³ which document changes in happiness over time in a nation.

Website

All this information is available on a website (<https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>) equipped with powerful search functions, which help users find their way in the growing amount of research findings on happiness. The site is freely available and has attracted some 18 million visits over the years. The homepage of the website is given in Chart 3 and visualizes the main structure of the database.

⁷ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/collections/distributional-findings-on-happiness/what-is-this-collection-of-distributional-findings-on-happiness-2/>

⁸ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/collections/correlational-findings/what-is-this-collection-of-correlational-findings-on-happiness/>

⁹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/wp-content/uploads/Introtext-CorrelationalFindings-Chapter5.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/reports-in-the-world-database-of-happiness/>

¹¹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/nations/>

¹² <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/rank-reports-of-happiness-in-nations/>

¹³ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/trend-reports-on-change-of-happiness-in-nations/>

USES IN RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

The main function of the archive is to facilitate the accumulation of knowledge on happiness by 1) the continuous gathering of research findings on happiness, 2) providing a structure to which these research results can be stored and 3) facilitating reviews of these findings, narrative reviews as well as quantitative meta-analysis.

Overview of the available findings

Providing an overview of available findings by using the database is done by 1) Pre-selecting work on happiness as defined above (note that while a search on Google Scholar of the word 'happiness' yields some 2,700,000 hits, the selection of concept for this database narrows it down to some 16,000 scientific publications), 2) fine-grained subject classifications, and 3) powerful search options on the website.

Preparation for research synthesis

The database puts the findings into order for a research synthesis by 1) describing all research findings in a standard format and terminology, 2) homogenizing the statistics used to describe the findings as far as possible and 3) sorting the findings by subject and methodology.

Presentation in review papers

The database allows for a new way of reporting research findings in a review paper. Using links to online finding pages, a lot of information can be condensed into a few tabular overviews. Two examples are presented below.

Example 1:

Presentation of research on economic growth and happiness

There is a considerable body of research literature on the relationship between happiness and economic growth in nations, most of which has been inspired by the 'Easterlin Paradox' (Easterlin 1974), which holds that an increase in individual income adds to happiness, but that a rise in the national income per head does not raise the average happiness of citizens. By August 2023, 55 research results on this subject were available in the collection of Correlational Findings, in the subject category of Economic growth/decline¹⁴. Of these findings, 24 summarized relationships in a correlation coefficient. These correlations are presented in the stem-leaf diagram in [Chart 4](#). The observed over-time correlations vary between +.001 and +.36. At a glance, one can see that economic growth typically went together with rising happiness. The few zero-correlations at the bottom of the diagram show that the Easterlin Paradox describes exceptions rather than a common relationship.

¹⁴ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=dsRjXokBf1zmZNOcvMgU>

Example 2:

Presentation of research on home-ownership and happiness

One of the major choices we make in our lives is to buy a house or rent one. In that context, it is worth knowing how other people have fared after making such a choice in the past. By January 2018, the World Database of Happiness held 46 research findings on that subject, which are summarized in [Chart 5](#). At a glance, one can see that home ownership tends to go with greater happiness and the + signs in the columns for longitudinal and experimental studies denote a causal effect. The positive correlations observed in developing nations suggest that this pattern is universal.

More examples of the use of the World Database of Happiness are found at <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/this-database/uses-of-this-database/>

USES IN CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

The following elements in the World Database of Happiness are particularly useful for the cross-cultural study of happiness.

Bibliography

Subject categories that are particularly relevant for the cross-cultural study of happiness are: happiness in anthropology¹⁵, comparability of happiness measurements across nations and languages¹⁶, happiness and ethnicity¹⁷ and observed differences in happiness across nations¹⁸.

Measures of happiness

The above-mentioned sorting of measures of happiness by conceptual focus involves a difference between the affective component of happiness (coded A) and the cognitive component of happiness (coded C), where the affective component is how well one feels most of the time and the cognitive component represents to what extent one perceives that one has gotten from life what one wants. In my theory of happiness (Veenhoven 2009, Kainulainen et al. 2018) the affective component of happiness reflects the gratification of universal needs, while the cognitive component reflects fit with culturally variable wants. As such, this difference links up with a main question in the cross-cultural study of happiness: to what extent is happiness culturally relative?¹⁹

¹⁵ https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/bibliography/#id=c8RpWokBf1zmZNOc_sgc

¹⁶ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/bibliography/#id=dMRuWokBf1zmZNOCTMja>

¹⁷ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/bibliography/#id=iMTBY4kbf1zmZNOcdMgD>

¹⁸ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/nations/>

¹⁹ This question is discussed in another chapter of this book

Language can make a difference in responses to questions on happiness, in particular the words used for response options on surveys. This problem is dealt with in the related International Happiness Scale Interval Study²⁰.

Distributional findings

This collection allows cross-cultural comparisons at the micro-level of individuals as well as at the macro-level of nations and regions.

Micro-level

The sorting of findings on happiness by population in time and place involves a distinction between *general public* and *special publics*²¹, where that the latter involves several populations that are relevant for the identification of cultural determinants of happiness within nations, such as migrants²² and religions²³.

Macro-level

A common kind of cross-cultural comparison is comparison across nations and the collection of distributional findings on happiness in nations provides a rich ground for such comparisons. By August 2023, it included 21000 findings on happiness in the general public in nations, concerning both average happiness in each nation as measured with the mean and inequality of happiness as measured using the standard deviation. This collection is fairly complete up to 2020. The rich data can be assessed in three ways: 1) by the search options on the website, 2) using the above-mentioned nation reports, and 3) using the related datasets titled States of Nations²⁴ and Trends in Nations²⁵.

In addition to these findings on happiness in the general public in nations, the collection further involves some 2600 research findings on happiness in special groups in nations such as among children²⁶ and the elderly²⁷.

Correlational findings

This collection provides cross-cultural findings on *determinants* of happiness as well as on *consequences* of happiness, which can be assessed in the following ways:

21. This question is discussed in another chapter of this book
related-sources/international-happiness-scale-interval-study/"<https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/related-sources/international-happiness-scale-interval-study/>

²¹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/collections/distributional-findings-on-happiness/distributional-findings-on-happiness-in-publics/>

²² <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/distributional-findings/#id=eMT7XokBf1zmZNOCGMir>

²³ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/distributional-findings/#id=ecT7XokBf1zmZNO7shi>

²⁴ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/related-sources/data-set-states-of-nations/>

²⁵ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/related-sources/data-set-trends-in-nations/>

²⁶ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/distributional-findings/#id=esQWX4kBf1zmZNOACjr>

²⁷ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/distributional-findings/#id=e8QWX4kBf1zmZNOcxsgm>

Cross-national findings

Correlational findings can be selected for methodology and one of the options is cross-national²⁸. By August 2023, this selection yielded some 2000 findings; a treasure trove for cross-cultural researchers.

Cultural correlates

Further selections can be made in this wealth of findings by selecting on the subject. When using the subject option on the search screen, main class of subjects is then shown with details about the characteristics of nations, including cultural characteristics²⁹, such as dominant religion and values. Further subjects that link up with questions in cross-cultural research are modernity³⁰, migration³¹ and value similarity, that is, fit with the values commonly held in one's social environment³².

Specifications by cultural variables

Correlational findings are often split into subgroups, such as when the correlation between happiness and income is presented separately for males and females. Gender is then denoted as a *specification* variable in the database. In the literature this also referred to as the 'elaboration' of an observed relationship and in statistical analysis quantified as an interaction. Among the specification variables used are several cultural variables, such as nation of origin³³, ethnicity³⁴, migrant status³⁵, era³⁶ and value preference³⁷.

While most of these cultural variables are seen as determinants of happiness, some denote consequences of enjoying life or not. In all subject categories, such findings are classified as 'later', that is, things that follow happiness. For example, findings on the relationship between happiness in youth and values in adulthood are coded as 'later values'³⁸.

How to add your findings

The World Database of Happiness serves not only to trace research findings gathered by colleague researchers but can also provide you with a channel for presenting your findings on happiness to the scientific forum. Go to <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/this->

²⁸ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=fsQGYIkBf1zmZNOc78iY>
²⁹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=fcQEYIkBf1zmZNOcnMhO>
³⁰ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=gMQTYIkBf1zmZNOcRMhW>
³¹ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=gcQTYIkBf1zmZNOc9sgo>
³² <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=f8QLYIkBf1zmZNOcTcgN>
³³ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=gsQcYIkBf1zmZNOcnciX>
³⁴ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=g8QdYIkBf1zmZNOc78il>
³⁵ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=hMQgYIkBf1zmZNOcY8h8>
³⁶ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=hMQgYIkBf1zmZNOcY8h8>
³⁷ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=hsQkYIkBf1zmZNOcksiF>
³⁸ <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/search-the-database/correlational-findings/#id=h8QsYIkBf1zmZNOcZ8hy>

[database/how-to-add-your-work/](#). Adding your work to the World Database of Happiness will increase its visibility and add to the chance it will be included in coming synthetic studies.

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Chart 1

Example of a distributional findings page



WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[This database](#) [Collections](#) [Search](#) [Reports](#) [Related](#) [Research Field](#) [FAQs](#) [About us](#) [Join us](#)

[print](#)

Study [Asgeirsdottir et al. \(2017\): study IS 2007](#)

Public: 18-79 aged, general public, Iceland, followed 5 years 2007-2012
Sample: Probability stratified sample
Respondents: N = 5216
Non Response:
Assessment: Questionnaire: Paper & Pencil Interview (PAPI)


Happiness measure(s)

Full text: Self report on single question:
Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
10 extremely happy
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1 extremely unhappy

Classification: [0-HL-u-sq-n-10-e](#)
Author's label: Happiness
Page in publication: 168, 170

Observed distribution		
Summary Statistics	On original range 1 - 10	On range 0-10
Mean:	7.80	7.55
SD:	1.71	1.90


The World Database of Happiness is based in the [Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization](#) EHERO of [Erasmus University Rotterdam](#) in the Netherlands. Director: [Ruut Veenhoven](#).



<https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/studies/asgeirsdottir-et-al-2017-study-is-2007-16076/>

Chart 2

Example of a correlational findings page



WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[This database](#) [Collections](#) [Search](#) [Reports](#) [Related](#) [Research Field](#) [FAQs](#) [About us](#) [Join us](#)

[print](#)

Study [Gallup & Kettering_\(1976e\): study ZZ Latin America 1976 /1](#)

Public 15+ aged, general public, Latin America, 1976

Sample

Respondents N = 2059

Non Response n.a.

Assessment Interview: face-to-face

Correlate

Authors's Label Age

Our Classification AGE \gg Current age (in years)


Distribution N= 1:898, 2:752, 3:349

Operationalization
1: under 30
2: 30-49
3: 50 and older

Observed Relation with Happiness

Happiness Measure	Statistics	Elaboration / Remarks
C-BW-c-sq-m-11-a	DM = -	1: M = 6,09 [CI95 5,96-6,23] 2: M = 6,03 [CI95 5,86-6,19] 3: M = 5,80 [CI95 5,55-6,05]
C-BW-c-sq-m-11-a	tc = -.03 p < .11	
Q-HL-g-sq-v-3-d	DM = -	1: M = 2,09 [CI95 2,04-2,13] 2: M = 2,06 [CI95 2,00-2,12] 3: M = 1,91 [CI95 1,83-1,99]
Q-HL-g-sq-v-3-d	tc = -.06 p < .00	
Q-SLW-c-sq-m-11-a	DM =	1: M = 6,79 [CI95 6,64-6,93] 2: M = 6,89 [CI95 6,73-7,05] 3: M = 6,63 [CI95 6,38-6,89]
Q-SLW-c-sq-m-11-a	tc = -.01 p < .62	


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<https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/correlational-findings/17450/>

Chart 3

Homepage of the World Database of Happiness



WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

› This database › Collections › Search › Reports › Related › Research Field › FAQs › About us › Join us

print

Harvesting Happiness Research

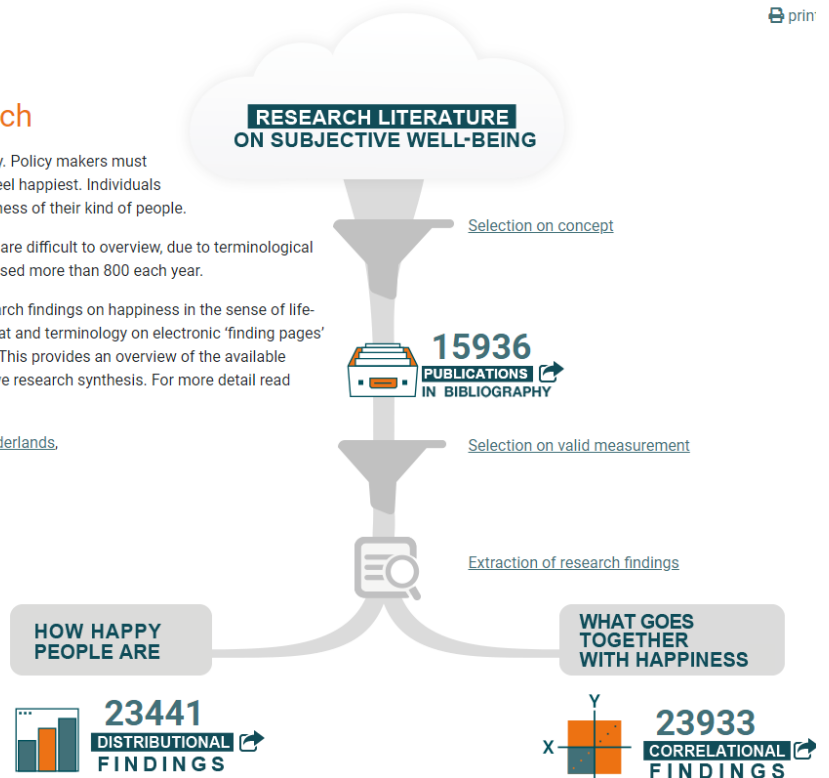
In order to get happier, we must know what makes us happy. Policy makers must know in what kinds of societies and organizations people feel happiest. Individuals must know what ways of life tend to add most to the happiness of their kind of people.

Scientific research on happiness is booming, but its results are difficult to overview, due to terminological Babel and the growing number of studies, which is now passed more than 800 each year.

In the World Database of Happiness, we gather all the research findings on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. We describe these findings in a standard format and terminology on electronic 'finding pages' which are sorted by subject, place, time and methodology. This provides an overview of the available research findings on happiness and prepares for quantitative research synthesis. For more detail read 'What is this World Database of Happiness?'

Key points in: [中国](#), [Deutsch](#), [English](#), [Español](#), [Français](#), [Nederlands](#).

[How to search in this source](#)



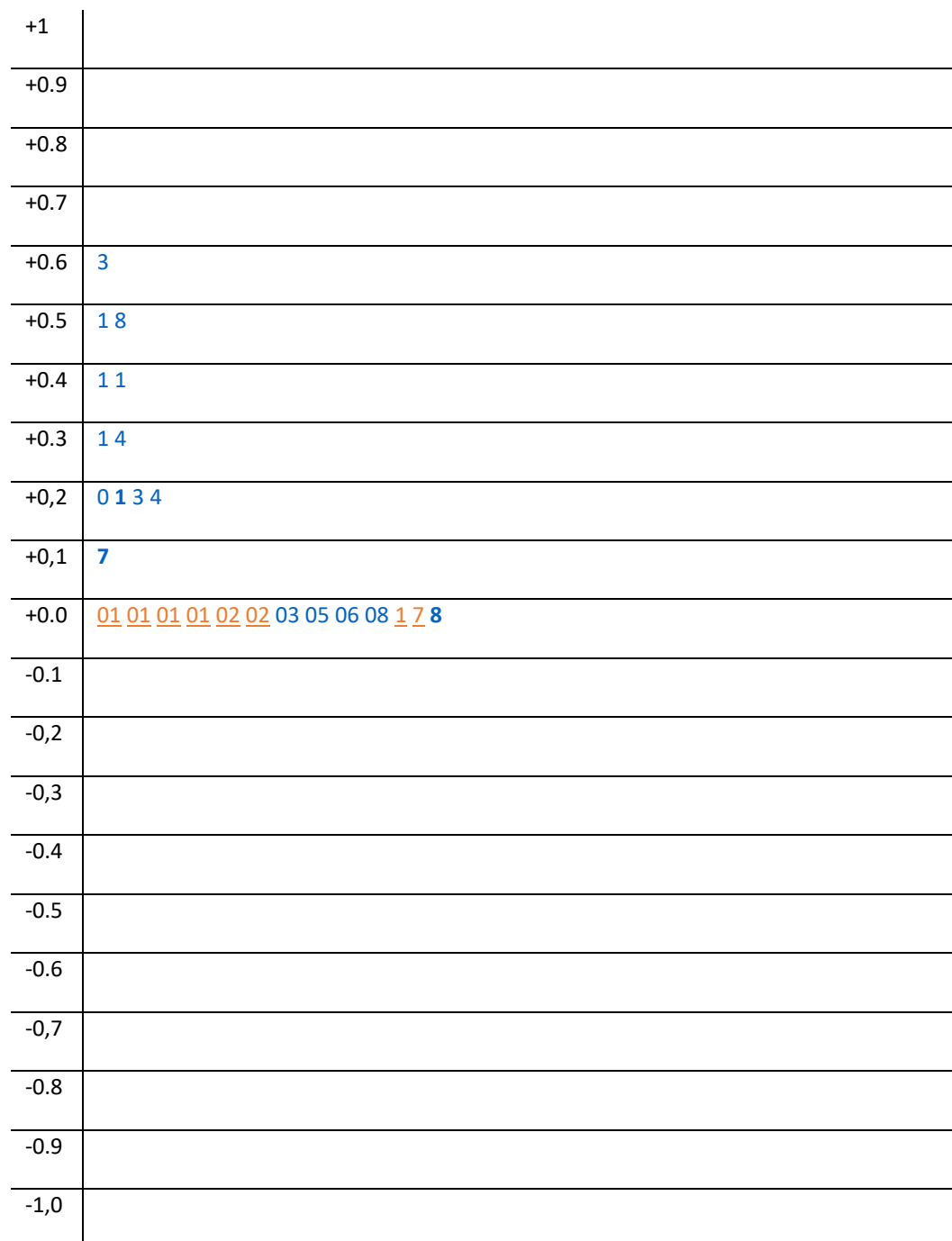
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<https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

Chart 4

24 research findings on the correlation between economic growth and the change in average happiness in nations



Each sign represents a correlational finding reported in the World Database of Happiness. Use Control+click to see the details. All blue numbers link to findings that are significant at the 5% level. Orange findings are not significant at the 5% level.

Source: Slag 2017

Chart 5
46 RESEARCH FINDINGS ON HAPPINESS AND HOME OWNERSHIP
Split by populations

	RESEARCH METHODS									
	Cross-sectional					Longitudinal			Experimental	
	Zero-order		partial			Zero-order	Partial		Zero-order	Partial
GENERAL POPULATION										
In all countries										
Developed countries	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	
	+	++	+	+	+	+	+	0	+	+
					+	+	+	+/+		
Developing countries			+		+	+	+	+	+	+
										-
SPECIAL POPULATIONS										
Age groups										
Students								+		
Elderly					+	-/0	0	0		
					0	0	-			
Health status										
Mental health						+	0			
Region										
Rural areas					-	-	0	0	0	
							0			

Signs link to the findings page in the [World Database of Happiness](#). Use control+click to view the page. (works only in electronic versions of this text)

Meaning of signs:

+ = positive correlation, significant

+ = positive correlation, not significant

0 = direction of correlation not reported and not significant

- = negative correlation, significant

- = negative correlation, not significant

++ = positive correlations with two different measures of happiness

-/+ = positive and negative correlations obtained with different sets of control variables

Source: Veenhoven et al. 2021