

# INEQUALITY OF HAPPINESS IN NATIONS

## Introduction to this special issue

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The first comparison of happiness in nations took place in 1948 and involved 9 countries (Buchanan, 1953). A second comparative study in 1960 covered 14 nations (Cantril 1965) and this was followed by a global survey in 1975 carried out by Gallup (1976), in which happiness in all parts of the world was assessed. Today we have comparable data on happiness in 90 nations and for a dozen nations we also have time series of 40 to 25 years (Veenhoven 2004). These data provide the fuel for a rising number of publications on happiness in nations. Currently, the Bibliography of Happiness counts some 400 entries on this subject, 20% of which have been published over the last 5 years.

### Focus

To date, all the studies have been focused on the *level of happiness* in nations, that is, on how happy citizens are in a country. In this special issue we look at the same data from a different perspective and focus on *difference in happiness* in nations, that is, on the degree of divergence with regard to happiness found among citizens in a particular country.

The subject of inequality of happiness has been addressed by Chin-Hon-Foei (1989), Veenhoven (1990, 1995, 2000, 2002) and recently by Cummins (2003) and by Fahey & Smith (2003). In this special issue we explore the matter more systematically.

### Relevance

Why look at inequality of happiness in nations? One reason is that most of us dislike inequality and prefer a society that with low inequality of happiness over a society, where the same level of happiness goes with greater inequality. Given this moral preference, it is wise to acknowledge the information that can be gleaned on inequality of happiness from the available survey data. The papers in this issue show that this information is quite useful for policymakers. Inequality in happiness differs widely across nations and the differences appear to be strongly linked to institutional conditions that can be changed by policy interventions.

Another reason is that inequality in happiness may be a good indicator of inequity in society, and possibly a better indicator than the income disparities that are central to comparative inequality research. In this issue, Ott (2005) shows that the cross-national pattern of income disparities differs widely from the pattern of differences in happiness. Veenhoven (2005) argues that social inequality cannot be measured adequately using disparities in specific input variables such as income. He claims that inequality in access to scarce resources can better be measured indirectly using the differences in final outcomes of life, such as difference in longevity and happiness. In his view this way of

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measurement is not only more apt for comparing across time and nations but also the most simple.

Further, inequality of happiness might be a causal factor in several contexts. For instance, one could imagine that inequality of happiness adds to other disparities in society, such as differences in outlook on life, and may thus fuel social conflict. The explanatory power of the variable is not explored in this issue, but the lays the foundation for investigations along this line.

### Articles

The first piece in this special issue deals with the measurement of inequality of happiness in nations. Kalmijn and Veenhoven (2005) take stock of various statistics of dispersion and inspect which of these are most appropriate for quantifying difference of happiness in nations. Four statistics perform about equally well in the tests, the interquartile range, the mean absolute difference, the mean pair difference and the standard deviation. Since the standard deviation is the most commonly used statistic, Kalmijn and Veenhoven advise researchers to continue the use of this statistic.

This advice is followed in the rest of the papers presented in this issue. In the two following papers the standard deviation is used to compare inequality of happiness across nations and in the last paper the standard deviation is used to address changes in inequality in happiness within nations over time.

The second article deals with the question of whether the utilitarian pursuit of greater happiness for a greater number might conflict with the egalitarian preference for greater equality in happiness. Several philosophers think that this is so, and taking the above as a starting point, Ott (2005) checks whether this is the case indeed. Ott first assesses the statistical relation between level and inequality of happiness in 80 contemporary nations, and finds that standard deviations are lower in nations where average happiness is higher. Next Ott considers the societal correlates of level and dispersion of happiness and finds that these are largely identical. Ott concludes that a utilitarian ideology is compatible with an egalitarian creed and that the armchair philosophers who claimed otherwise were wrong.

The third article is also about utilitarianism and egalitarianism. Veenhoven and Kalmijn (2005) propose a social indicator that marries these ideologies. Their measure of 'Inequality Adjusted Happiness' (IAH) gives equal weight to both values and expresses the joint performance in an index that varies from 0 to 100. This combined measure differentiates well among contemporary nations. IAH also appears to be sensitive to societal characteristics, such as economic development, political democracy and personal freedom. The authors conclude that IAH is a useful tool for assessing social progress and that this indicator will appeal to the public.

The last piece is about egalitarianism in particular; Veenhoven (2005) looks at the claim that inequality is on the return in modern society. He argues that one should not measure inequality using the differences in presumed *chances* for a good life, such as income, but that inequality should be measured using the dispersion of actual *outcomes* of life, such as happiness or longevity. Using standard deviations, Veenhoven inspects whether

inequality of happiness has changed in 14 modern nations over the last decade. He does indeed find a change, but contrary to common belief, inequality appears to have lessened. Next a comparison across 80 nations shows that inequality of happiness is typically lower in the most modern societies of this time. On this basis Veenhoven concludes that the long-term trend toward greater social equality still persists.

The data on inequality of happiness in nations used in these analyses were taken from the World Database of Happiness, section 'Distributional findings in nations' (Veenhoven 2004). This database contains the results of the available general population surveys that included questions on subjective appreciation of one's life as a whole. Currently the database covers 2310 surveys in 116 nations and it provides time-series of more than 20 years for some 15 nations. This data collection can be assessed free on the web. The background variables used in the cross-national analyses are also available and can be found in the section 'States of nations' of the World Database of Happiness. So, should you doubt the conclusions presented in this issue we ask you, a critical reader, to take a second look at the data, and we invite you to take part in the ongoing debate regarding inequality of happiness in nations.

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