

LEVEL OF EDUCATION AND THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS

by Ruut Veenhoven and Peter Bakker

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Dpt of sociology,
Working paper
December 1977

SUMMARY

This study examines the long-held belief that a high level of school education is conducive to later happiness. An inspection of 28 studies carried out in various countries does not support this belief. It reveals a puzzling variety of results rather than a universally positive relation. Nineteen studies report positive relations, eight do not find any relation at all and one finds a negative relation. The data suggest that the happiness effect of education is highest in the underdeveloped countries, and that during the last few decades it has almost disappeared in the western world.

A closer analysis of the Dutch study which found a negative relation between level of education and happiness ($G = -.12$ $p < .01$) revealed that the relation is most negative in the higher social strata and among younger women who have experienced a social degradation from the upper to the middle class.

1 The problem

It is a common belief that educational success embodies a promise of later happiness. Philosophers of all times have cited the satisfactions of intellectual comprehension. Especially in the Enlightenment the benefits of education for a fuller and happier life were stressed. Rousseau for example maintained that a proper intellectual education during childhood is the basis of future happiness. This belief is still in force nowadays. Continued school attendance and good marks are generally thought to further the chances for later psychological well-being. Accordingly parents and teachers warn children who tend to drop out not to "throw away their life". Children are encouraged to forego all kinds of enjoyments which might interfere with the demands of the school. We meet this same idea in political debates. Compulsory education has been advocated as a way of bringing happiness into the lives of the poor and more recently "equality of educational opportunities" is often equated with "equality of happiness-chances".

The claim that school education furthers later happiness is sometimes substantiated by suggesting the causal mechanisms involved. At least three of these explanations have achieved common sense status:

First of all education is often claimed to yield many direct satisfactions. Understanding is thought to be a pleasant experience in itself, and as education gives rise to more understanding, it should also result in more pleasant experiences and thus in more happiness.

A second common sense theory holds that school education effects adult happiness indirectly by providing chances for a better social position. Higher education is presumed to further chances for upward social mobility, and as conditions for happiness are thought to be better in the higher social strata, the more highly educated are expected to experience more of it.

Finally, modern pedagogues stress that, apart from intellectual skills, school education furthers psychological competence as well. The school is thought to make its pupils more creative, imaginative, more balanced and more socially competent. Thus the longer one's stay

in educational settings and the higher one's educational achievement, the better one should be able to cope with life's everyday problems and the happier one should be.

These propositions sound plausible. However, quite opposed hypotheses can be advanced and seem equally true. Obviously the educational setting inhibits development in several aspects: less motivated activity, less varied social contacts, etc. Also there is some truth in the observation that long school attendance creates an unrealistic picture of social reality and that the things learned in school often prove useless in real-life situations. Many more negative effects of school education on happiness could be imagined. As we lack a theory of happiness their value it is difficult to weigh; what we need is an empirical check. Therefore we set out to assess whether the more highly educated are actually happier people.

2 Happiness and the level of education in surveys in several nations

The first step is to assess whether the relation between level of education and happiness has been studied previously. A cursory look in the literature reveals a wealth of studies which claim to have done so. Educational level has been related to factors labeled happiness, mood, life satisfaction, morale, psychological well-being, etc. These studies concern quite different groups: e.a. navy recruits, schizophrenics and housewives. Not surprisingly the results differ greatly.

In order to reduce this complexity three steps were taken. First the concept of happiness was delineated. It was defined as an attitude towards one's life; more specifically as "the degree to which an individual judges his life on the whole as favourable". Second we decided to restrict ourselves to those studies which use highly similar indicators of this concept. Studies which do not use direct questions on happiness or on the quality of one's life as a whole were omitted. Finally we also omitted studies which are not based on a representative sample of a national population. This rigorous selection limited the amount of studies drastically. Only 27 were left.

Most of these studies present their results in frequency distributions. In order to facilitate comparison we computed association values on the basis of these frequency distributions. As both variables are measured at the ordinal level Gamma values seemed appropriate. We added a study ourselves, more fully reported in the next paragraph.

The results are presented in table 1. They present a rather chaotic picture. We see considerable differences between nations as well as great differences in the results obtained at different points in time in the same nations. The data suggest that the happiness effect of education has diminished during the last decade in both the Netherlands and the U.S.A. We also see a stronger happiness effect of education in the underdeveloped countries. This pattern is far from perfect however.

We will not try to explain these phenomena. We suffice by pointing out that these data do make clear that there is no simple clear-cut relation between level of education and happiness. Eight out of the twenty-eight studies reported here find no relation at all, one finds a negative relation and nineteen a positive relation. Obviously the relation between education and psychological well-being is more complicated than we tend to think.

3 Factors in the relation between happiness and level of education

As can be seen in **table 1** the most recent study in the Netherlands by the present authors ¹⁾ discloses a small but significant negative relation. There are several reasons for having a closer look at this study: First of all the negative direction of the relation is somewhat surprising and needs control. Has the happiness question been misunderstood or has something gone wrong in the data processing? We found no indications. On the contrary: three other instruments used in that study, which come close to our indicator of happiness, in one should be

produced similar results. High level of education turned out to be positively related to "depression" ($G = +.09$ $p < .01$), "sense of uselessness" ($G = +.16$ $p < .01$) and "sociosis" ($G = +.16$ $p < .01$).

²⁾ Second, in search of an explanation for this negative direction in the relation we elaborated the relationship for some other factors which could possibly disguise a positive relation between level of education and happiness. Sex could be such a factor. Education probably has a greater instrumental value for males than for females and therefore could be positively related in males, while on the other hand the relation could be negative in females because the highly educated housewife may feel incapable of realizing her capacities and be inclined to unhappiness as a result. Age might also play an important role: the younger one is, the more one's occupational chances depend on education. In the older age groups practical experience counts more and relatively smaller career movements are made, which is likely to reduce the impact of educational level for the elderly. Similarly we could expect social economic status to represent a differentiating variable. Apart from the happiness inherent to high social status in itself, we could expect a positive relation between level of education in the higher classes, because higher education is probably more valued in these circles and furthermore because it represents harmony between educational and social achievement. A high level of education in the lower social strata on the other hand represents a dissonance and will probably be interpreted as a personal failure by both the subject and his environment. This line of thought also leads us to expect differences in the relation between level of education and happiness in an elaboration by social mobility. Especially in people who have experienced downward social mobility we can expect high education to be associated with unhappiness.

The data are presented in **table 2**. Surprisingly they confirm none of these hypotheses except the last one. The relationship between level of education and happiness appears to be almost unaffected by sex and age. Contrary to the positive relation expected, the relation appears to be significantly negative in the highest social status group. In the lowest status group the level of education turns out to be unrelated to happiness instead of being negative.

It is only among those who had experienced downward social mobility that the anticipated depressing effect of higher education on happiness is confirmed. In particular well-educated young women who dropped from upper class to middle class status seem relatively unhappy. Probably most of them suffer the frustrations of the housewife role. Though not that pronounced the relationship is still negative among those who experienced upward social mobility. Climbing the social ladder is apparently more fun without a diploma in one's pocket.

In our search for factors intervening in the relation between level of education and happiness we finally stuck on the phenomenon that the happiness of the better educated is less affected by common domain satisfactions. (Table not shown). The happiness of the less educated is apparently easier to predict on the basis of the satisfactions they express with for example their marriage, their standard level of living and their health than the happiness of the better educated. The less-educated would seem to derive their happiness from the more common satisfactions of life. One possibility is that prolonged education nurtures different aspirations and tastes which, at in the Netherlands least, are more difficult to satisfy.

4 Conclusion

Contrary to common belief a high level of education is not always conducive to adult happiness. The happiness effect of education is limited and varies greatly. We have as yet no clear understanding of the intervening variables involved. Further research seems worthwhile.

NOTES

1) The study is a secondary analysis of a survey by Aakster (1972). The design of that investigation was as follows: A representative sample of 2367 persons was drawn out of the 25-65 aged population of the Netherlands by probability area sampling. These persons were visited at home in June, 1968.

Only 66% of them were actually interviewed: 10% refused, 21% could not be reached and 3% turned out to be unusable. Control for sex, age, marital status, area and size of residence revealed a slight underrepresentation of unmarried men and women, and of inhabitants of smaller towns. The western part of the nation was slightly overrepresented.

The respondents filled out a questionnaire themselves and handed it after completion in a sealed envelope to the interviewer, who was instructed not to interfere in the response process, to prevent others from doing so and to take care that the respondent did not change his answer or look back at earlier ones. On average the interview lasted about 50 minutes. Only a small proportion of the questions were left unanswered (0.5%). Coding and punching operations can be said to be very reliable.

The questionnaire first asked for some social background variables, one of which was education. The level of school education was classified according to the school types known in the Netherlands at that time. As school systems in other countries are slightly different it is difficult to explain precisely what level each school type represents. Globally the classification concerns the following categories: primary school unfinished or special education, primary school, low level secondary school, high level secondary school, university, college. The questionnaire continued with many detailed questions about health complaints and about attitudes and feelings.

2) *Sense of uselessness*; measured by a single direct question "Do you sometimes feel doubt about the usefulness of your life?" rated on an open graphic scale ranging from "very often" to "never".

Depression; measured by a five item index: feeling of doing everything wrong, dark moods, feeling uncertain, feeling of being perceived peculiar and frequent crying, each measured by a simple direct question rated on an open graphic scale.

Sociosis; measured by three item index containing: dislike of company, not getting along well with others and no confidence in others, each measured by single direct questions rated on an open graphic scale.

REFERENCES

- Aakster, C.W. (1972)
Socio-cultural variables in the etiology of health disturbances,
Groningen.
- Andrews, F.M. & Withey, S.B. (1974)
Developing Measures of Perceived Life Quality,
Social Indicators Research, Vol. 1, p. 1-26.
- Bradburn, N.M. & Caplovitz, D. (1965)
Reports on Happiness,
Aldine, Chicago.
- Buchanan, W & Cantril, H. (1953)
How nations see each other,
University of Illinois Press, Urbana,
- Campbel, A., Coverse, P.E. & Rodgers, W.L. (1976)
The quality of American Life,
Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Cantril, H. (1965)
Patterns of Human Concern,
New Jersey.
- Gurin, G., Veroff, A. & Feld, S. (1960)
Americans view their mental health,
Basic Books, New York.
- Matlin, N., (1966)
The demography of happiness,
Master Sample Survey of Health and Welfare Series 2, no. 2,
San Juan.
- Moser-Peeters, C.J.M., (1969)
Achtergronden van geluksgevoelens,
TNO-NIPG, Leiden.
- Pallmore, E. & Luikart, C , (1972)
Health and social factors related to life satisfaction,
Journal of Health and Social Behavior, Vol. 13, p. 68-80.
- Snijder, E.E. & Spreitzer, E.A., (1975)
Involvement in sports and psychological well-being,
International Journal of Sport Psychology, Vol. 5, p. 28-40.
- Wessman, A.E., (1956)
A psychological inquiry into satisfactions and happiness,
Unpublished doctoral dissertation,
Princeton University.

table 1 Level of schooleducation and psychological well-being in survey studies in several nations

population		sample	association of level of school education with happiness	elaboration	measure of well-being used	source
Australia	1948	national sample n = 945	$G' = -.01$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 130
Brazil	1960	national sample n = 2168	$G' = +.50$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Cuba	1960	national sample n = 992	$G' = +.09$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Dominican Republic	1960	national sample n = 814	$G' = +.69$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
England	1948	national sample n = 1195	$G' = +.09$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 138
France	1948	national sample n = 1000	$G' = +.20$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 148
Germany (West)	1948	British occupation zone n = 3371	$G' = +.03$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 156
	1960	national sample n = 480	$G' = +.07$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
India	1958	national sample n = 2366	$G' = +.31$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Israel	1960	national sample n = 1170	$G' = +.55$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Italy	1948	national sample n = 1078	$G' = +.13$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Snyder 1953 p. 176
Mexico	1948	national sample n = 1752	$G' = +.20$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 189

population	sample	association of level of school education with happiness	elaboration	measure of well-being used	source
Netherlands	1948 national sample n = 942	$G' = +.37$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan p. 197
	1967 big town (Utrecht) N = 300	$G' = +.01$	not affected by sex and age	single direct question on happiness	Moser-Peeters 1969 p.
	1968 national sample n = 1.52	$G' = -.12$	unaffected by sex, age and SES. Stronger for those who experienced downward social mobility	single direct question on happiness	present study
Nigeria	1960 national sample n = 1200	$G' = +.23$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Norway	1948 national sample n = 1039	$G' = +.24$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Buchanan 1953 p.205
Panama	1960 national sample n = 642	$G' = +.72$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Phillippines	1960 national sample n = 500	$G' = +.23$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life	Cantril 1965 p. 378
Puerto Rico	1964 national sample n = 1417	$G' = +.19$	in the lower incomegroups the relation does not exist	single direct question on happiness	Matlin 1966 p.19
U.S.A.	1946 national sample n = 2377	$G' = +.20$		single direct question on happiness	Wessman 1956 p. 188
	1948 national sample n = 1015	$G' = +.16$		single direct question on life satisfaction	Buchanan 1953 p. 213

population	sample	association of level of school education with happiness	elaboration	measure of well-being used	source
U.S.A.	1960	national sample n = 1549	$G' = +.23$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life Cantril 1965 p. 378
	1962	four towns differing in economic prosperity in Michigan n = 2006	$G' = +.27$	stronger in low income groups in all ages negative in high income 60+ group	single direct question on happiness Bradburn 1965 p. 9
	1971	national sample n = 2164	$r = +.05$	when elaborated for income, interviewer estimated intelligence or satisfaction with education the relationship turns out to be slightly negative when elaborated for both income and intelligence it is more significantly negative when elaborated for both intelligence and satisfaction with education the relation is very negative ($r_p = -.24$)	composite of a single direct question on life satisfaction and an 8 item index of life characterizations Campbell 1976 p. 371
	1972	national sample n = 1297	$h^2 = +.07$		single direct question on lifesatisfaction Andrews 1974 p. 20
	1974	town (Toledo) n = 510	$G = -.08$		single direct question on happiness Snyder 1974 p. 32
	Yugoslavia 1960	national sample n = 1523	$G' = +.48$		single direct question on perceived quality of ones life Cantril 1965 p. 378

— $p < .01$ G' = Gamma computed by the present authors on basis of frequency distributions presented in the original reports

Table 2

level of education and happiness in 25-65 aged population of the Netherlands elaborated for sex, age, SES and social mobility, in Gamma

	all	sexe		age			social economic status		
		males	females	< 35	35-44	45-65	high	middle	low
<u>sexe</u>									
- males	-.13								
- females	-.10								
<u>age</u>									
- < 35	-.16	-.24	-.03						
- 35-44	-.16	-.13	-.24						
- 45-65	-.11	-.12	-.10						
<u>SES</u>									
- high	-.17	-.15	-.20	x	x	-.03			
- middle	-.06	+.11	-.00	-.06	-.10	-.06			
- low	+.01	+.05	-.03	-.02	-.21	-.18			
<u>social mobility</u>									
- downward	-.24	-.18	-.35	-.40	-.28	-.22	x	-.36	-.01
- no change	-.09	-.10	-.08	-.07	-.14	-.09	-.24	-.04	-.10
- upward	-.11	-.15	+.07	-.12	-.11	-.14	-.15	-.03	x

— p < .05

x less than 70 ss in this category