

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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How harmful is happiness? Consequences of enjoying life or not.

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1. THE PROBLEM

'Happiness' is commonly seen as a positive and desirable goal; indeed the utilitarian moral philosophers even proclaimed it to be the most desirable goal; in their view all action should be judged on the basis of its happiness revenue, the best alternative being the one which yields 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. This 19th century moral philosophy is at the ideological basis of the 20th century welfare states. Governments are required to create a 'livable' society in which people can enjoy life. In order to monitor success in that, most states instigate periodical quality-of-life surveys, involving questions on happiness or life satisfaction. These investigations are meant to guide social policy. Levels of happiness are assessed to make sure that no discontent is brewing; the distribution of happiness is considered to identify social categories that deserve special care and there is an attempt to discover determinants of happiness in order to find ways of improving it. Promotion of happiness is one of the goals of state sponsored social security and (mental) health care.

Though widely accepted, the ideology of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' has not been left undiscussed. There are still many who consider individual happiness a mixed benefit, and who would rather give priority to values such as 'equality', 'solidarity' or 'faith'. At least two kinds of objections are raised: firstly, the value of happiness is questioned; claims are made that suffering is more valuable, and the pleasurable life is depicted as 'superficial' and 'meaningless'. Secondly, it is argued that there are more valuable things than happiness and that happiness may be detrimental to other values: in this context there are warnings that pleasurable living tends to 'spoil' us and to lead us away from 'higher goals'. The first objection is a matter of appreciation and cannot be judged. The second is at least partly a matter of fact and can, as such, be verified empirically.

Though open to empirical investigation, no research has been done on the consequences of happiness, current happiness research being focused on determinants exclusively. The debate is therefore dominated by speculations: the following claims about the positive and negative effects of happiness are being made.

1.1 Claimed negative effects

Negative consequences of happiness have been stressed by anti-hedonistic moral philosophers. The arguments often mix up happiness with pleasure seeking.

One of the harmful effects mentioned is that happiness turns people into contented cows. Enjoyment of life, it is said, leads to idleness, discontent no longer stimulating the search for a better life. As a result creativity falters and arts and sciences dry up.

In this vein it is also predicted that happiness will destroy itself in the long run, because it weakens us. Smug contentment numbs our outlook on the world and induces a glassy and rosy view, which ignores disturbing signs of suffering and danger. Happy citizens would therefore be inclined to fall prey to political manipulation. Happiness-addicted people would be particularly dependent on the technocrats of hedonism in the service of the utilitarian welfare state. Happiness would soothe the political protest and nourish political conservatism. It has also been suggested that 'happy-soft' societies tend to be overrun by 'unhappy-hard' hordes.

Another negative effect, it is claimed, is that happiness weakens social bonds. Contentment is seen to lead into selfish individualism, because it results in self-conceit. Thus happiness would create a society of isolated egoists.

These views are presented literally in Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World'. They imply that a happy life does not bring out the best in us. Happy people make for an ugly society; in this view mild unhappiness would be preferable.

1.2 Claimed positive effects of happiness

Present day psychologists on the other hand stress the desirable effects of enjoying life. Different schools depict different benefits.

Humanistic psychologists were the first to stress positive effects of enjoyment. Echoing early Greek eudaemonism, Maslow (1968) suggests that, together with 'joy' and 'peak-experiences', happiness accompanies growth towards 'self-actualization'. In his view happiness is both a result and an accelerator of growth. Contrary to the above mentioned negative views, Maslow does not regard frustration as an indispensable impetus for action. He is rather skeptical of what he calls 'deficiency motivation' and expects humans to perform at their best when propelled by 'growth motivation': i.e. 'pulled' by pleasure instead of being 'pushed' by pain. In opposition to anti-hedonist arguments, humanist psychologists associate happiness with zest and believe that it stimulates activity and sharpens awareness. With effort and attention no longer fixed on frustrations, human potential can be used to its full extent. Consequently it is thought that happiness fosters creativity rather than kills it. In this view happiness facilitates social contacts, enjoyment freeing the way to authentic encounters, while unhappiness leads to preoccupation with self. The happy, growing individual is able to become involved in other people, rather than using them for filling in the blanks. He is also more sensitive to other people's needs and emotions. These capacities are crucial in contacts with children: young children in particular. A poor relationship with parents can harm severely the mental health of children. Fromm claims that "... a mother must not only be a 'good mother', but also a happy person".

A theme in current cognitive psychology is that positive self-attitudes work as a buffer to stress. With a positive view of the world, stressful life-events are perceived as challenges rather than as threats. Bad luck hurts less because one can draw on some emotional reserve. Protective effects of this kind are currently attributed to a high esteem of one's 'competence' in dealing with problems of life and to perceived 'social support'. Incidentally they are associated with a positive appreciation of life-as-a-whole, or with mood level. The more one enjoys life, the better one can take the knocks.

The latter view links up with the assumption of psychosomatic theory that chronic frustration tends to increase vulnerability to disease. An implication of this view is that discontent with one's

life-as-a-whole is likely to affect health negatively and that a positive appreciation of life will preserve good health.

Finally, an emerging view in the realm in clinical psychology is that the inability to enjoy life (anhedonia) plays a role in the onset of psychopathology. Chronic dissatisfaction is believed to hinder effective coping in several ways: among other things by blocking reinforcements necessary for learning and activation. The pattern of 'learned helplessness' would be one of the results.

Taken together these ideas suggest that humans function best when they take pleasure in life. Hence happy people make for a sane society.

2. RELEVANCE OF THE PROBLEM

This discussion is not a mere academic matter. Knowing whether happiness is harmful or not is of relevance in several ongoing social debates. It is for instance an issue in education. Should we follow modern pedagogues who stress the importance of a happy youth or should we rather force our children to virtue even if that galls their life? The matter figures also in current discussions on medical ethics. Should doctors aim primarily at the quality of life or at length of life. Consequences of happiness are also relevant to current discussions on the welfare state. As noted above the promotion of happiness is one of the goals of current welfare states. If the realization of that aim involves negative side effects that is of course an argument against the welfare state. Finally the controversy about the consequences of happiness is an issue in the longstanding debate between ascetic moral philosophies and humanism. The former reject human nature and earthly living and glorify suffering. The latter accept human nature and value enjoyment of one's existence. The humanist view prevails in the present epoch. Yet the debate is still smoldering and flames up periodically. Coming reorientations on our basic values badly need a solid basis of established facts. Knowledge on the consequences of happiness will be helpful in that context.

3. EARLIER RESEARCH

In the course of the last few decades a lot of empirical studies on happiness have been performed. For a review see Veenhoven (1984). Unfortunately these studies are of little use in this discussion. Most provide only simultaneous correlations, which do not inform us about cause and effect. For example, the often observed correlation between happiness and 'helpfulness' can mean both that happy people are more inclined to help and that helping makes them feel more happy. In order to assess causal effects of happiness we need studies of an experimental or at least a longitudinal design. Such studies are scarce in this field.

Elsewhere I reviewed the few available data (Veenhoven 1988). That review covered some forty experimental and longitudinal studies that happened to involve some clues about consequences of happiness. I found indications of several small effects of happiness. Enjoyment of life appeared to broaden perception and to encourage activity. Social contacts appeared positively affected by happiness as well, in particular contacts with spouse and children. I also found indications of positive effects on health and longevity. I found no evidence of any harmful effects.

4. APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

The goal of this book is to dig up more information about the consequences of happiness. For that purpose two ways are followed.

Firstly the book presents several new analyses on longitudinal datasets. None of these panel studies were originally meant to assess consequences of happiness. In fact I tracked down some panels involving measures of happiness and invited the investigators to reconsider their data in the light of this question. These analyses concern the following effects of happiness: 'health after stress' (chapter 2), 'longevity' (chapter 5), 'unemployment' (chapter 8) and on the 'outlook on life' (chapter 10). These effects are by no means the only issues in the discussion, but they are the ones about which appropriate data are available at this moment.

Secondly, the book includes reviews of the research on consequences of matters that are closely related to happiness. These related matters are: 'political (dis)content' (chapter 7), 'job satisfaction' (chapter 9) and 'morale of patients' (chapters 3 and 4). Though these phenomena are not the same as 'happiness' as will be defined below, they are pretty close. Empirical findings on their effects are therefore at least suggestive. As these related fields are well researched, the reviews are likely to provide relevant clues.

4.1 Concept of happiness

'Happiness' or 'life-satisfaction' is the overall appreciation of one's life as a whole. In short: how well one likes the life one leads. Happiness in this sense is not the same as 'mental health', 'adjustment' or 'hope'. Overall happiness must also be distinguished from appraisals of specific aspects of life, such as satisfaction with one's job or acceptance of the political order. The overall appreciation of life tends to draw on both affective and cognitive appraisals. These are referred to as 'components of happiness'. The affective component is called 'hedonic level of affect' and concerns the degree to which pleasant affect dominates over unpleasant affect. The cognitive component is referred to as 'contentment' and is the degree to which the individual perceives his aspirations to be met. Elsewhere I have discussed these concepts and their operationalisation in more detail (Veenhoven 1984 ch. 3 and 4).

4.2 Leading questions

All the contributions in this book consider the following questions: 1) Is happiness (or its proxy) of any consequence? If so 2) Why and how do these consequences occur? and 3) Are these consequences to be considered desirable or not?

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