
CHAPTER 11.

CONCLUSIONS

Ruut Veenhoven

In: Ruut Veenhoven (ed) (1989) How harmful is happiness? Consequences of enjoying life or not. Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, The Netherlands. ISBN nr. 90 257 22809 pp. 128-135

This book started with three questions about possible consequences of enjoying life or not: 1) whether any causal effects of happiness can be demonstrated: 2) how such effects come about, and 3) to what extent these effects are to be considered beneficial or harmful.

How far did we get in answering these questions? Modest advance was made in answering the first one: we found empirical indications for several effects of happiness and in two cases even convincing evidence. With respect to the second questions we were less successful: various hypotheses about possible mechanisms behind possible effects of happiness have been proposed, but none of these could be demonstrated convincingly. We were in fact most successful in answering the last question. We found no evidence for claimed negative consequences of enjoying life and a lot of indications for positive effects.

1. OBSERVED EFFECT OF HAPPINESS

The possible effects of happiness considered in the foregoing chapters can be grouped in six categories: 'outlook', 'health', 'marriage', 'work', 'vigilance' and 'events'. In all these categories did we meet with (encounter?) indications of causal effects of happiness. Only in two cases that evidence can be considered convincing.

Outlook

The appreciation of life as-a-whole affects the evaluation of various aspects of life.

Chapter 10 provided sound evidence for effects on satisfaction with marriage, job and standard of living. However not all domain satisfactions appear to be influenced by happiness: satisfaction with health and with social support were not.

Chapter 10 also showed that happiness predicts a more favourable judgement of the fit of one's situation with expectations, aspirations and entitlements. Chapter 8 demonstrated a similar effect of happiness on the judgement of unemployment consequences.

Chapter 10 further showed that happiness fosters a sense of relative superiority, which means that it strengthens subjective self-reliance.

The size of these effects can only roughly be estimated. The rigorous controls of chapter 10 mark a minimum explained variance of 4% in the case of separate satisfactions and 15% in the case of self-perceived competence. Zero-order correlations mark a maximum of about 30%

Health

Three chapters considered the effects of happiness on health. Chapter 6 showed fairly convincingly that the happy live somewhat longer. Happiness at age 60 explains 1 to 8% of the variance in longevity.

The longer life of the happy is probably not the result of a lower vulnerability to stress. Chapter 2 fairly convincingly rejected the hypothesis that happiness buffers stress.

Is the longer life of the happy then a result of better recovery chances in case of illness? Chapter 3 suggests it is not. Yet the data presented in that chapter cannot decide the issue, because they concern cancer specifically and do not quite fit the concept of happiness at stake here. Hence this possibility remains open for the time being.

Marriage

Chapter 6 presented several indications of an effect of happiness on marriage chances. The happy seem to have a better chance of finding a spouse and to be less prone to divorce. Yet the evidence was not quite conclusive. The size of this effect is maximal some 5% of the variance in marital status.

Work

There are indications that happiness fosters employment chances and work productivity, but again evidence is not conclusive. (Chapter 6 resp. chapter 9). If involved anyway, the size of the effects tends to be quite small. Possibly the effects of happiness on workperformance is more sizable at the higher occupational levels.

Vigilance

The chapters 4 and 7 suggest that happiness does not make people docile and may even foster active action both in private matters and in public issues. Yet the evidence presented in these chapters is not conclusive: the study designs do not allow the identification of independent causal effects and the data do not concern happiness in strict sense.

Life events

There are indications that happiness effects good luck. Chapter 10 showed that a positive appreciation of life predicts the report of relatively much favourable life events. It is as yet unclear to what degree this effect is a mere perceptual phenomenon.

2. PROPOSED CAUSAL MECHANISMS

In the foregoing chapters we met with several suggestions about possible causal mechanisms behind the presumed effects of happiness. The claims concern perceptual matters in the first place and further 'activation', 'social contacts' and 'personality development'. Only in the first case is there convincing empirical evidence.

Outlook

Several contributions mentioned 'outlook' as a possible causal mechanism. Chapter 2 set out with the suggestion that happiness buffers stress by way of fostering a more positive outlook on the problems of life and on one's ability to deal with them. Likewise chapter 3 proposed that happiness may help to overcome disease, because its perceptual effects prevent people give up too early. In the same vein chapter 4 suggests that the slightly greater self-care of satisfied patients comes about through a more positive outlook on themselves and their control of the situation. These latter mechanisms are also mentioned in chapter six as links in the relationship between happiness and marriage chances.

As we have seen in chapter 10 there is good evidence that happiness does induce a more positive outlook. However it is not yet established that this effect on outlook materializes in lower stress, better recovery, more self-care or better marriage chances.

Health

In two contributions effects of happiness by way of 'better health' were suggested. Chapter 2 mentions the possibility that the happy can take more knocks because they tend to be healthier. Chapter 8 mentions health effects of happiness as a possible reason for the slightly better employment chances of the happy. As we have seen there is some evidence that happiness tends to foster health indeed: we can at least be reasonably sure that happiness lengthens life. However, there is not yet proof for the proposed intermediate effects.

Energy

Several contributions suggest effects through greater 'alertness' and 'activity'. All refer to earlier research showing the energizing effects of pleasant effect. In this context chapter 2 proposes that the happy deal better with stress because they cope more actively. Chapter 4 mentions greater energy as the reason why satisfied patients take better care for themselves. Chapter 6 refers to this matter in the context of marriage- chances and chapter 8 in the context of employment-chances. Chapter 10 also hints to this effect in the discussion of the possibility that the happy are more satisfied with various aspects of life because they have in fact created better living conditions for themselves. None of the contributions could demonstrate these explanations empirically.

Social contacts

Facilitation of social contacts was also mentioned as a mediator variable. Chapter 6 presented evidence that happiness facilitates social contacts, among other things because cheerful people are better liked. Chapter 2 suggest this facilitates the mobilisation of social support, which in its turn facilitates coping with stress. Chapter 8 mentions social contacts as a possible reason for better employment chances: finding a new job is facilitated through smoother social contacts because it gives better asses to the informal job market and the chances for keeping one's job may be strengthened through better contacts with colleagues. Chapter 10 again hints to this matter in the discussion of the possibility that happy people create themselves better living conditions.

Though it is quite plausible that happiness facilitates social contacts, this effect has not been demonstrated conclusively as yet. There is no empirical evidence at all for the claimed intermediate effects. Hence, fort the time being, this remains all hypotheses.

Personality development

Finally there is the claim that happiness affects personality development and thus involves long term consequences in many spheres of life. This possibility is mentioned in chapter 6 in the discussion of the reasons for the better marriage chances of the happy. It is suggested that a positive appreciation of life facilitates the development of traits like 'empathy', 'self-esteem' and 'inner-control' which are crucial requirements in the modern love pattern. That argument can also be applied to observed differences in 'self-care', 'political vigilance' and work performance.

Yet it is not at all sure that happiness seriously affects personality development. Though there is good evidence for strong correlations over time, it is still largely unclear what is cause and what effect. Therefore this explanation remains hypothetical as well.

3. INDICATIONS OF HARM AND BENEFICE

The introductory chapter to this book set out with an enumeration of claimed harmful effects of happiness (page). Next several claims to the contrary were presented: claimed benefits of happiness (pages). Lets us now take stock of the evidence provided by the later chapters:

3.1 No harm demonstrated.

Three possible harmful effects of enjoying life were mentioned: 'passive contentment': a 'too rosy view' and 'social isolation.'

Passive contentment

The first claim of harmful effects was that happiness turns people into contented cows, who passively enjoy life but do nothing. This claim was not confirmed in any of the contributions in this book, Chapter 7 in particular showed that contentment does not lead into political apathy. Rather we met with several indications to the contrary. Chapter 4 showed that satisfied patients are more active in matters of self care rather than less. Chapter 6 suggests that the greater marriage chances of the happy result from their greater activity. Likewise chapter 8 mentions the possibility that the greater employment chances of the happy are due to their greater activity.

Too rosy view

The second claim was that a positive appreciation of life gives raise to an unrealistically rosy view on life, which blinds to longterm dangers and injustice. This claim was not confirmed either. Though chapter 10 did confirm that happiness does foster a more positive outlook, we did not meet with any evidence that this more positive view is less realistic. In this context we must again bring back in mind chapter 7 which found happy citizens to be no less critical and chapter 4 which showed that satisfied patients are no less well informed.

Social isolation

The third claim was that happiness weakens social bonds: misery would unite people whereas happiness would nuclearize. We did not meet any evidence for this claim but chapter 6 provided strong indications for the contrary. There is good (though not convincing) evidence that a positive appreciation adds to the chance of finding a spouse and sustaining the marriage. Happiness probably strengthens bonds with wider kin and friends as well.

3.2 Several indications of beneficial effects

Six possible positive consequences of enjoying life were mentioned: More 'intimacy', greater 'activity': sharper 'awareness', less 'vulnerability to stress', protection of 'health' and better 'psychological development'.

More intimacy

Contrary to the claim of egoistic isolation humanistic psychology sees happiness as a facilitator of social contacts: of intimate contacts in particular. As noted above this view is supported by the findings reported in chapter 6 (however not convincingly proven).

Greater activity

Humanistic psychology also claims that enjoyment of life stimulates active involvements. Several contributions in this book provide support for that view. Chapter 4 observed more self-care among satisfied patients. Chapter 6 suggests that the happy have better marriage chance because they take more initiative in matters of love. Likewise chapter 8 suggest that the better employment chances of the happy are due to more active job hunting and -if employed- greater work involvement. That latter suggestion is also raised in chapter 9.

Sharper awareness

In the same vein humanistic psychology sees the happy also as more perceptive and alert. As

mentioned above, we did not meet with evidence that the happy are less attentive but we did not meet with evidence of greater attentiveness either. At best chapter 6 bears the suggestion that the better marriage chances of the happy reflect their greater empathy.

Buffer to stress

Cognitive psychology was attributed the view that a positive appreciation of life may help to cope with demanding live situations. The evidence at this point is contradictory. On the one hand that happiness probably protects against overacting and panic, because it fosters a positive view. Chapter 10 convincingly demonstrated that happiness fosters a positive outlook in general. Chapter 8 demonstrated it also does in the case of unemployment. On the other hand chapter 2 showed that happiness does not mitigate the (slight) adverse health effects of burdening life-events.

Protection of health

The related claim from psycho somatic medicine was that happiness decreases the vulnerability to disease. Here again the indications contradict. On the one hand we met with two rejections of the claim. As noted above chapter 2 found no evidence of less health damage following stress among the happy and chapter 3 casts doubt on the belief that happiness fosters recovery from illness, at least where cancer is concerned. On the other hand chapter 5 rather convincingly shows that the happy tend to live longer. This result strongly suggests that some kind of health protection is involved, though we do not know which.

Better psychological development

Humanistic psychologists have depicted happiness as an accelerator of 'psychological growth' while in some clinical writings it figures as one of the things that may help to avoid 'pathological development'. None of the contributions in this book bear direct evidence to these claims. Yet several explain their results in such terms. Chapter 6 mentioned possible development effects of happiness as one of the reasons for the better marriage chances of the unhappy and chapter 10 strongly suggest that the rosier view on their life of the happy may be partly due to the fact that their life situation is in fact better because they are more effective psychologically. Though not implausible these explanations are not proven.

4. IN SHORT

There are no indications that the claimed negative effects of happiness exist, but there are good indications for several of the claimed positive effects. After all: happiness does not appear all that bad.