

IS HAPPINESS RELATIVE?

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ABSTRACT

The theory that happiness is relative holds that happiness results from comparison. Standards of comparison are assumed to adjust and thus to prohibit lasting increase in happiness above neutral. Standards are further seen as arbitrary and happiness therefore not as a valuable matter. This theory is at odds with leading beliefs in present welfare-society.

Recent investigations on life-satisfaction claim support for this old theory. Life-satisfaction is reported to be as high in poor as in rich countries (Easterlin) and no less among paralysed accident victims than among lottery winners (Brickman). These sensational claims are inspected, but found untrue.

1 INTRODUCTION

The theory that happiness is relative is old. It was already advanced by early Greek philosophers, in particular Epicurus and the Stoics. Through the ages it remained a common theme in philosophy and the *'belle lettres'*. See Tatarikewics (1975 ch. 11). Today the theory lives in the social sciences as well: in economics (i.e. Easterlin 1974), in sociology (i.e. Runciman 1966) and in psychology (i.e. Brickman and Campbell 1971).

Though held in great respect intellectually, this theory is seldom followed in practice. Many struggle all their life in hope of getting happier. At the collective level many organizations try to improve the happiness of their clients, and most modern welfare states see it as their duty to create conditions for happiness of the citizens. So there is something queer with this theory. This paper tries to find out what.

Any discussion of the theory requires that we first define happiness. Overall *happiness* is conceived here as the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favourably. In other words: how well he likes the life he leads.

There is evidence that the 'overall' evaluation draws on more specific appraisals of life, in particular on an 'affective' and a 'cognitive' one. These appraisals are referred to as 'components' of happiness. The affective component is the 'degree to which the various affects a person experiences are pleasant' and will be called *hedonic level*. The cognitive component concerns the 'degree to which an individual perceives his aspirations to be met' and is labelled *contentment*. These concepts are described in more detail in Veenhoven 1984a: 22-28.

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2 THE THEORY THAT HAPPINESS IS RELATIVE

The theory that happiness is relative has many variations, called different names. Let us first enumerate the common assumptions and then consider some variations.

2.1 Postulates

Happiness results from comparison.

The evaluation of life is a more or less conscious mental process and involves assessment of the degree to which life-as-it-is meets standards of what life-should-be. The better the fit, the happier the person.

Standards of comparison are arbitrary.

Standards of comparison are mental constructs individuals develop. Therefore standards differ with dispositions, life history and environment. These subjective standards do not necessarily fit actual requirements for a good life, such as 'preservation of health', 'meaningful activity' or 'development' (so-called 'objective' standards). People may settle for less than possible or may consider their life a failure if they have not managed to become a millionaire.

2.2 Inferences

Happiness is irrelevant.

As happiness depends on arbitrary standards and inaccurate perception, people can be happy in miserable conditions or unhappy in good ones. Such happiness is not worth pursuing. It is merely a coinage of the brain.

Happiness is evasive.

Because standards of comparisons are variable mental constructs that adjust to circumstances, there is little sense in trying to raise happiness. Happiness can at best be raised temporarily. Any improvement is overhauled by adjustments of standards in the long run.

3 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

For long, the theory was merely speculation, at best supported by introspective recognition. In the last few decades systematic empirical checks have been made. Several investigators claim to have found convincing support for the theory. Their reports are now widely quoted. Below I will shortly review this evidence and examine it critically.

3.1 Relative wealth more satisfying than absolute wealth?

The relationship between material wealth and happiness is a good test case. Wealth is an important standard in social comparison, because it is both fairly well observable and a socially valued matter. Wealth is also a prominent cue in comparisons through time and an easy quantity

to define aspirations. If happiness is indeed relative, we can expect that relative wealth is related to happiness but not absolute wealth.

Claimed proof.

Easterlin (1974) claims to have demonstrated these predictions to be true. He presents three pieces of evidence.

Firstly, he compares average happiness in different countries around the world. He concludes that the differences in happiness between poor and rich countries are small and inconsistent (See [Scheme 1](#)) (p.107).

Secondly, he compares average happiness in one nation through time. He shows that Americans have remained equally happy between 1945 and 1970, in spite of a doubling of the national income during that period.

Thirdly, happiness is compared within countries between income brackets. Now rich persons appear consistently happier than poor ones (p. 99-104). On the basis of the latter observation Easterlin concludes that happiness depends on relative wealth, whereas the first two observations lead him to believe that happiness is insensitive to material wealth as such.

Proof reconsidered.

Easterlin's comparison between rich and poor countries involves two nation-sets: the 14 nations of Cantril's (1965) famous world survey and another 9 nations in which Gallup polls had asked identical questions on how happy one feels generally. These data are presented in the tables 6 and 7 of Easterlin's article. Looking at these tables I saw, however, a clear - though not perfect - relationship. To make sure I computed product-moment correlations. These are +.51 and +.59 respectively. I would not call that relationship 'uncertain' as Easterlin does on p. 118. How do these high correlations fit the presentation in [Scheme 1](#)? That presentation is simply misleading. Easterlin played the classic trick of scales: the scale for national wealth is 2.5 times longer than the happiness scale. If both variables are plotted on equally long scales, quite a different picture emerges. (See [Scheme 2](#).) Now we not only see clear positive relationship, but also a curvilinear pattern, which suggests that wealth is subject to a law of diminishing happiness returns. That pattern links up better with need-theory of happiness than with comparison theory (Veenhoven 1987).

It is possible that these data do not even show the relationship to its full extent. In both sets of nations the underdeveloped countries are under-represented. Therefore, I examined the same relationship in the data of a more recent large scale world survey, performed by Gallup International in 1975 (Gallup 1976/77). This study samples part of the world rather than nations and covers the poor regions of South Sahara Africa and East Asia (unfortunately not the communist countries and the Middle East). In this sample the correlation between GNP per capita and average happiness is + .84! The pattern is again curvilinear.

Easterlin's claim that happiness is insensitive to collective progress is at best half true. It may apply to the US in the post-war decades, but it does not to the Western European countries in that same period. Between 1948 and 1975 these countries witnessed both a startling economic

recovery and a general rise in happiness. The percentage of unhappy persons was halved during that period (Veenhoven 1984a: 171). In Brazil rapid economic growth between 1960 and 1975 was also followed by a raise in happiness. These findings fit the above observed trend of diminishing happiness returns of wealth. In very rich countries like the US further increase in wealth does not add to happiness while it does in poor countries such as in war-stricken Europe in the late forties and early 50's and in Brazil in the 1960's.

Easterlin's third empirical claim is not wholly true either. Though happiness is indeed related to personal income in several countries, this is not the case everywhere, in particular not in the rich welfare states. See Veenhoven 1984a: 3 13-5.

In sum: The evidence Easterlin presents is partly fraudulent and partly outdated. His interpretation is one-sided.

3.2 **Happy in spite of misfortune?**

If standards are oriented to the recent past and tend to adjust to failure and success, we can expect people to remain fairly happy in spite of serious misfortune. We can also expect so if we assume people to compare themselves with people in similar situations, and thus to equally unlucky ones.

Claimed evidence.

Several investigators do indeed report high levels of happiness among unfortunates: Cameron et al.(1971) for malformed persons, Brickmans et al.(1978) for paralysed accident victims shortly after the accident and Shulz & Decker (1985) among long term spinal cord injured persons. These studies are summarized in [Scheme 3](#).

Evidence reconsidered.

A first thing to note is that unfortunate persons are not as happy as 'normal' ones. [Scheme 3](#) shows, in fact, consistently lower scores. Still, the difference may be smaller than one would expect.

Probably the difference is in fact greater than appears in the scores. As can be seen in the second column, the first two studies did not assess happiness in the same way. The happiness of the unfortunates was assessed in face-to-face interviews, while controls were interrogated by telephone or a written questionnaire. Contrary to Briekman's reassurance on p. 919, these interrogation modes do yield different responses. Same subjects have been shown to report more happiness in a face-to-face interview than through the telephone (Smith 1979:27) or a questionnaire (Suchman 1967). The differences are in the realm of one point of the 11 step-scale used here. (see [scheme 3](#))

Still another thing is that the controls in Cameron's study are not just 'normals'. Cameron drew his malformed subjects largely from hospitals and matched his control group accordingly. That means that about twothird of the 'normals' were in hospital at the time they filled out the questionnaire.

The example of the happiness of the handicapped is misleading for another reason as well. It is a typical case of misfortune hurting less than expected. Yet there are also examples of misfortune that do render unhappy. Some of these are presented in exhibit 3b. As we can see, mothers of handicapped children are clearly less happy, and so are people who lost a spouse by

death or who witnessed the holocaust. If adjustment of standards is involved in these situations, it apparently does not suffice for maintaining happiness.

Lastly, the reverse case of lottery winners, so often mentioned in reviews of this matter. Brickman et al. found lottery winners hardly happier than average and attributed the unexpected absence of a difference to inflation of aspirations. Yet they did not demonstrate anything of that kind. There are other possible explanations: limited importance of money to happiness in their social milieu, problems of reorientation in work and social relations, being envied and regarded as a *nouveau-riche*, etc. In this context it is worth noting that Diener (1985) did find very rich Americans to be much happier than average. Adaptation of standards is far more likely among the very wealthy than among lottery winners. The former are more likely to compare themselves to other rich people, to have lived in luxury all their life and have reason to expect to become even richer than they are now.

In sum: the facts presented are inaccurate and selective. Their interpretation is one-sided and exaggerated.

3.3 **Happier after hard times?**

The theory that people compare their situation to the past, predicts that hard times tend to be compensated later. If sufficiently salient at least, bad experiences in the past mark a low reference point which sheds a rosier light on present day conditions. In this line, Brickman & Campbell (1971:293) suggest that a moderate unhappy youth predisposes to adult happiness. Is that true?

Claimed evidence.

A commonly mentioned study in this context is Elder's (1974) famous investigation among 'Children of the Great Depression'. This study involved retrospective interviews about conditions in youth and a follow-up during adulthood. Happiness at the various stages of life was scored on a so-called 'life-chart'. It appeared that the respondents who remember most hardship in their youth characterized their youth as less happy, but demonstrated more increase in happiness in the years after. They ended more happy in middle age. Elder claims this because memories of the Depression functioned as a standard for evaluating subsequent life-experiences (p.259).

Evidence reconsidered.

Though suggestive, this finding is not convincing. The result may be an artefact of the life-graph method which is likely to overemphasize contrast and to focus on salient happiness in the past. Decisive evidence requires identical questions on present happiness at different points in time.

Even if Elder is correct, there is also evidence to the contrary. In an intensive depth study among college students Wessmann & Ricks (1966:104-122) found retrospective reports of an unhappy life-history to be strongly linked to present unhappiness. Likewise, five years after the end of World War II students in war-afflicted countries appeared less happy than students who had witnessed the war from behind safe frontiers (Barschak 1951:179). Even more clear is the case of holocaust survivors: rather than consider themselves more happy, they appear far less happy than the general public in Israel (Antonovski 1971:188).

Obviously hard times influence happiness in more ways than by setting standards. Adversity influences skills for living: positively if problems can be dealt with and negatively if the individual loses control. This may mean that Elder's 'Children of the Great Depression' learned more from their experiences than that they suffered from it. A difficult youth may also predispose to a pessimistic view which colours the appreciation of life into adulthood. The gradual 'defrosting' of such a perceptual habit may as well explain Elder's result.

In sum: there is as yet no convincing evidence that hardship predisposes to later happiness: not even that moderate hardship does.

3.4 Does happiness tend to be neutral?

The theory predicts that experiences of happiness and unhappiness alternate and largely out balance each other. Comparing ourselves with others, we are subsequently happy or unhappy because we rise or fall relatively, but then go back to neutral because we skip to a same kind of reference-group. Likewise, comparison with earlier conditions predicts that happiness oscillates around neutral. If we improve, we feel happy for some time, but soon we get used to that level and feel neutral again, if not unhappy, because the progress lasted only a short time. The same applies to comparisons with expectations and aspirations. If all this is true, we can expect that happy and unhappy periods will counterbalance through life, and that in the general population happy and unhappy people tend to match as well. This implication is known as the zero-sum prediction. See Unger (1970) for a formal statement.

Evidence to contrary.

The claim that happiness oscillates around zero has been considered in longitudinal studies on both overall life-satisfaction and hedonic level (remember the conceptual distinctions in the introductory paragraph). If happiness oscillates around zero, the correlations should be negative: the happier one is now, the more likely one is to be unhappy at the next interview. This is not the case: retest correlations are about +.50 (research reviewed in Veenhoven 1984a: 44-371, see also Stones & Kozma 1986).

Early investigators claim to have found evidence for cyclical variation in hedonic level (Hersey 1932, Morgan 1934). However, more sophisticated studies later on did not reproduce that pattern. Over a six-week period Wessman & Ricks (1966:63) found no alternating fluctuations nor a balance of positive and negative affect. A similar result is reported by Fordyce (1972:151-3).

Representative surveys find typically that the great majority of the population claims to enjoy life more or less. Only in very poor countries the number of unhappy citizens equals that of the happy ones. (Research reviewed in Veenhoven 1984b: 509-522). Similarly, studies on hedonic level in Western nations show that positive affect typically outbalances negative affect (Veenhoven 1984b: 523, Bless & Schwarz 1984).

Counterclaims.

The finding that people are typically happy rather than neutral met with much objection: not only from proponents of zero-sum theory, but also from social critics who cannot believe that people enjoy life in this society. It is claimed that people overstate their happiness for reasons of social desirability and self-defense and that survey questions evoke stereotypes rather than real experience. Elsewhere I have checked all the claims in detail and found them generally untenable (Veenhoven 1984a, ch. 3).

Another attempt to save the zero-sum claim was made by Parducci (1965, 1968) who claims that, when comparing themselves to the ‘average’ citizen, people tend to project that average at the midpoint of the range they oversee, assuming implicitly a normal distribution. Distributions of life chances are often skewed however: society may, for instance, provide justice to the great majority but discriminate a salient minority. In that case most citizens are likely to place themselves above the average, while, in fact, they are not.

Though there is probably truth in this theory, it can hardly explain the overwhelming dominance of happiness observed. The bias involved is a minor one and is moreover likely to neutralize itself to a large extent, because it can work positively as well as negatively depending on the distribution of life chances. There is no reason to assume that all the chances people consider in estimating their success in life are in fact over-represented at the positive half of the scale.

In sum: the zero-sum predicted is not confirmed in facts.

4 DISCUSSION

Clearly the data does not wholly confirm the theory that happiness is relative. This indicates that there is something wrong with its postulates.

The first postulate was that happiness is a matter of comparison. This in fact equals ‘happiness’ with ‘contentment’ (remember the conceptual distinction in section 1). Yet overall happiness is unlikely to be a matter of comparison only, because it also draws on hedonic affect. Affective experience on its turn seems to draw on largely unconscious need-gratification rather than on the conscious comparison of aspirations and achievements.

The second postulate holds that levels of aspirations adjust to any situation. Yet aspirations are probably not without any anchor, but linked to innate needs and social values.

5 CONCLUSION

Happiness is not entirely relative. Hence there is sense in trying to promote happiness.

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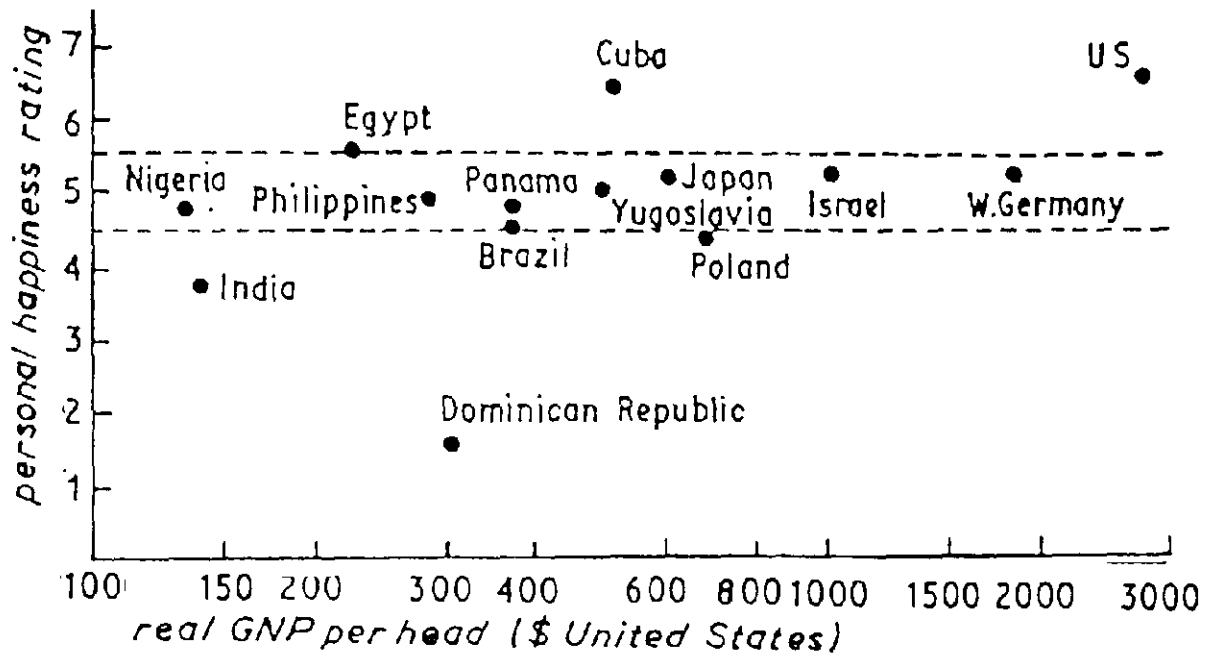
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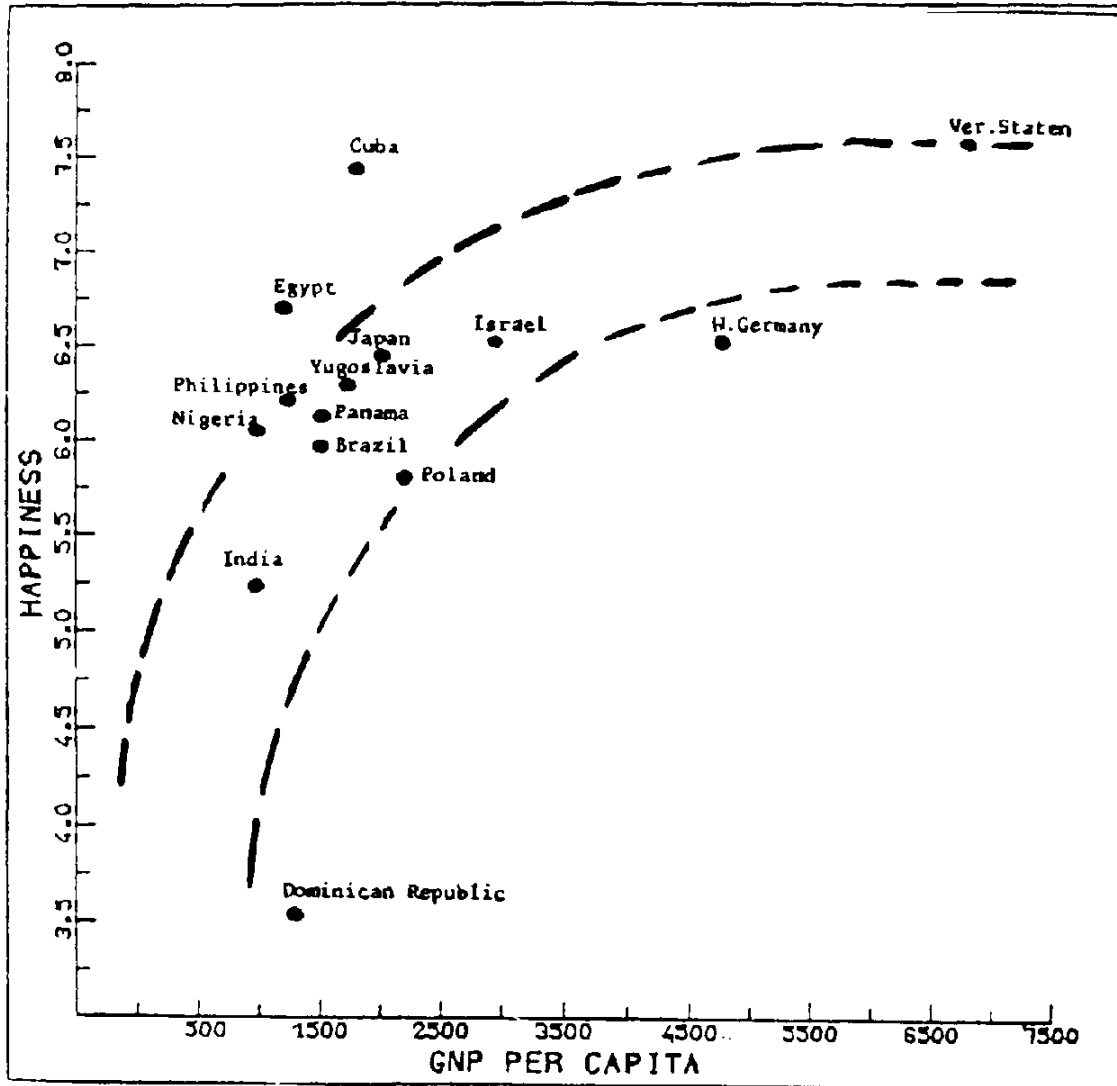
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Scheme 1



Scheme 2



Average happiness and GNP in 14 countries. My presentation of Cantril's data.

Scheme 3

Happiness in misfortune. Examples cited in support of the theory that happiness is relative

<i>subjects</i>	<i>interrogation</i>	<i>happiness item</i>	<i>standardized scores (0-10)</i>	<i>significance of difference</i>	<i>source</i>
paralyzed accident victims (1 to 12 months after injury)	face to face	How happy are you at this stage of life?	5.4	p< 0.1	Brickman et al. 1978:921
controls picked from telephone directory	telephone		7.0		
spinal cord injury (20 yrs after injury)	half face to face half telephone	Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn 1965)	6.2	ns	Schulz Decker 1985:1167
general population sample	mailed questionnaire		6.7		
malformed	questionnaire ^x	These days my life is: just great/more than	7.5	ns	Cameron et al. 1971:641/2
matched control group (2/3 hospital patients)	questionnaire ^x	satisfactory/satisfactory/ less then satisfactory/ miserable	7.7		
		How would you describe your general mood; happy/neutral/sad ?	8.1 8.5	ns	
		Do you find life frustra- ting? Never/infrequently/ sometimes/frequently/ constantly	6.7 6.8	ns	
mothers of handicapped young child	mailed question- naire	Affect Balance Scale (Bradburn 1965)	6.7	p<.0005	Friedrich & Friedrich 1981:553
matched control	mailed question- naire		8.4		
60+ widowers 60+ married males	interview interview	Generally speaking how happy would you say you are these days: very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?	5.5 8.0	p<.01	Glenn 1985:596
Holocausts survivors Israelies of same age	interview interview	Cantril (1965) Ladder Rating	5.6 6.5	p<.01	Antonovski et al. 1971:189

^x read to blind and controls