

IS HAPPINESS MERE CONTENTMENT? Cognition and affect in the overall evaluation of life

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SUMMARY

This paper is about the overall appreciation of ones life-as-a-whole, shortly called life satisfaction' or 'happiness'. It tests the common view that this evaluation draws on cognitive comparison rather than on affective experience. The following pieces of evidence to the contrary are presented:

- 1. Happiness is not more closely linked to perceptions of success in aspirations than to level of affect.*
- 2. Being 'better-off' is not more decisive to happiness than being 'well-off'.*
- 3. Happiness does not tend to be neutral; a positive appreciation of life is the rule.*
- 4. The reasons why one evaluates life positively or negatively are not always evident.*

It is concluded that we use two sources of information in evaluating life. Cognitive comparison tells us how well we are doing according to socially constructed standards. Hedonic affect signals the degree to which basic bio-psychological needs are being met.

1 THE PROBLEM

This paper is about the overall evaluation of ones life-as-a-whole, shortly called 'life satisfaction' or 'happiness'. 1) The question addressed is whether this evaluation is primarily a cognitive matter or that it draws on affective experience as well.

1.1 Two views on happiness: *contentment vs. enjoyment*

The words 'satisfaction' and 'happiness' have connotations of both 'enjoyment' and 'contentment'. These meanings mark different views that date back to Antiquity.

The 'enjoyment-view' emphasizes affective experience. Happiness is seen as a continuous flow of pleasant feelings, moods and emotions. The reverse is 'depression'. Enjoyment-happiness is often seen as a result of zestful living, 'fully functioning' giving rise to positive experience. Early advocates of this view were the Greek Hedonists who thought of happiness as the sum of pleasures and pains. Present day supporters are psychologists who focus on hedonic level of affect (i.e. Wessman & Ricks 1960, Fordyce 1972).

The 'contentment-view' rather emphasizes cognitive construction. Happiness is seen as the result of a mental calculus involving primarily the comparison of aspirations and achievements. The reverse is 'relative deprivation'. Contentment-happiness is often associated with passivity. Early representants of this view were the Stoic philosophers who claimed that lasting happiness requires that we give up desires. Present day adherents are social scientists who believe that happiness is relative (i.e. Brickman & Campbell 1971, Easterlin 1974).

These views are mostly implicit. They do not appear in a definition of happiness, but pop up in explanations of it. Explanations that depart from the contentment-view refer to the dynamics of aspirations, to achievement chances and to the perception of success. Accounts tend to be clear and simple. The enjoyment-view provides less easy clues. Explanations are typically tentative and refer vaguely to things as endowments, inner harmony and need gratification. Probably because it enables easier understanding the contentment-view dominates nowadays.

1.2 Implications of the contentment-view

Thinking of happiness as contentment is not without consequences. The view implies that happiness is a relative and for that reason not a relevant goal in social policy. Happiness is a relative matter in this view because it results from comparison. Being happy means in fact thinking to be better off.

There are two reasons why such happiness is not valued very much. Firstly, relative satisfaction is not the good life. People can be satisfied in bad conditions because they resigned, or be dissatisfied in good conditions because they foolishly reach out for more. Misperception of success can be involved as well. Secondly, there are good reasons to doubt that such happiness can be furthered enduringly. Because aspirations tend to follow reality, happiness is likely to be a short lived phenomenon. Even if living conditions are improved substantially, we remain equally (un)happy in the long run. If this is all true, happiness is not a relevant goal for social policy: Both because it is not valuable in itself and because greater happiness is not attainable anyway.

That implication is at odds with a basic assumption underlying present day welfare states. Ideologically welfare states root in the utilitarian moral philosophy that marks the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' the highest goal. Though subjective happiness is certainly not the only or even ultimate goal of current welfare states, it is at least one of the endvalues they pursue (next to goals as to equality, justice, safety and freedom). Consequently welfare states legitimize themselves i.e. by the claim to have eliminated much suffering in the last decades and by the expectation that they will make life even more satisfying in the future. 2) Is this in fact an illusion, or is something wrong with the contentment-view of happiness? The matter is worth a closer examination.

1.3 Research question

The question considered in this paper is whether the 'contentment-view' on happiness is indeed more valid than the 'enjoyment-view'. To that end the hypothesis is tested that the evaluation of life draws on cognitive comparison primarily and that 'raw' affective experience is not decisive.

2 TESTS OF THE CONTENTMENT VIEW OF HAPPINESS

If the overall evaluation of life is indeed mainly a matter of comparing aspirations and achievements, the following predictions must be true.

1. Ratings of overall happiness should correspond more closely with perceptions of success in aspirations than with daily affect.
2. Happiness should appear to be a matter of being 'better off relatively' rather than being 'well off objectively'.
3. Happiness should appear to be a short-lived phenomenon that tends to neutral in the long run.
4. People should be well aware of the reasons why they are happy or not.

Below these inferences will be presented in more detail. Next they will be checked empirically. Data used for that purpose come from different sources. All meet the demands for the valid measurement of happiness I described elsewhere (Veenhoven 1984 ch. 4. 3)

2.1 **Is happiness more closely linked to perceived success than to experienced affect?**

If the overall evaluation of life draws on comparison with standards of success rather than on affective cues, we can expect people to report themselves happy even though they are in low spirits quite often. Claiming to be happy in spite of a large gap between aspirations and achievements must be less common. This implication can be checked by comparing the correlations to overall happiness of indicators of contentment and hedonic level.

Elsewhere I have classified current measures of subjective wellbeing and distinguished between indicators of 'overall happiness' (life satisfaction), 'contentment' and 'hedonic level'. See Veenhoven 1984 Ch. 4. This classification is used in the World Database of Happiness which stores correlational data on happiness.

Inspection of this database reveals that 28 studies have produced correlations between happiness and contentment or between happiness and hedonic level. This allows us to check whether the former tend to be more sizable than the latter. However, comparison is complicated by great variation in indicators, population and statistics. Therefore I restricted to studies in general population samples that use clear cut indicators and report the correlation in a zero-order statistic that ranges from -1 to +1. This left me with 8 studies, the results of which are summarized in the exhibits 1 and 2.

Both exhibits show sizable variations around a high level of correlations. Contrary to the prediction the correlations between happiness and contentment level are not greater than those between happiness and hedonic level: Average coefficients are respectively +.48 and +.54. The proof of the pudding is of course one same study that involves all three indicators. Such design also allows the computation of partial correlations in order to check whether contentment and hedonic level relate to overall happiness independently. I did not find such a study as yet. I plan one myself.

To sum up: The available data do not suggest that happiness links more closely to contentment than to hedonic level. Yet they cannot decide the issue.

2.2 **Does happiness depend on being 'better off' rather than 'well off'?**

The relationship between material wealth and happiness is a good test case. Wealth is an important standard in social comparison because it is both well observable and socially valued. Wealth is also a prominent cue in comparisons through time and an easy quantity standard for defining aspirations. If happiness is indeed relative we can expect 'being better off to be related to happiness, but not 'wealth as such'.

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 (p.106/7). See [exhibit 3a](#). Secondly, he compares average happiness in one nation through time. He shows that American 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. Easterlin presents differences in happiness between rich and poor in 29 nations, the rich appear consistently happier than the poor (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 involved 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 his report. Looking at these tables one sees 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 [exhibit 3a](#)? 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 and logarithmic. If both variables are plotted on equal scales, quite a different picture emerges. See [exhibit 3b](#). Now we not only see a clear positive relationship, but also a curvilinear pattern, which suggests that wealth is subject to a law of diminishing happiness returns.

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 underrepresented. 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 parts of the world rather than nations and covers the poor regions of Sub-Sahara Africa and East Asia (not, unfortunately, the communist countries and the Middle East). In this sample the correlation between GNP per capita and average happiness is +.84! ($p < .01$). The pattern is again curvilinear.

Easterlin's third empirical claim is that - in all countries - the rich are happier than the poor. In other words: He demonstrated a universal firm and positive correlation between individual happiness and relative income position. He does indeed show that the rich are typically happier in the 29 countries he considers. Yet he ignores the sizable variations in the difference. If Easterlin had considered these variations he would have observed that the difference between rich and poor tends to be smaller in the more prosperous countries. This obviously does not fit comparison theory, which predicts that the differences are independent of the level of living in the country because it is the relative difference that matters. Still another thing is that his data are outdated. They were all gathered around the year 1960. Elsewhere I have shown that correlations between happiness and income have decreased in first world nations during the last decades (Veenhoven 1984a:193).

Therefore I did a similar analysis with data gathered between 1975 and 1985. See [exhibit 4](#) which shows the correlation between individual happiness and relative income in 22 nations. As can be seen there is no straight tendency of the rich being happier. Though the correlations tend to be positive, they vary much between countries and are often close to zero. The strong positive correlation that Easterlin presents as universal pattern appears in fact only in half of the cases. The other half is characterized by quite small positive correlations and in one case the correlation is even negative. The variation is not random, but follows the economic prosperity of the country: The higher the gross national product, the lower the correlation between individual happiness and relative income ($r = -.35$). The USA marks as an exception in this pattern, probably because of the pronounced social inequality in that country.

To sum up: Happiness is clearly not a matter of social comparison only. More cues must be involved.

2.3 Does happiness tend to neutral?

The contentment-view of happiness predicts that experiences of happiness and unhappiness alternate and largely outbalance each other. Comparing ourselves with others, we are seen to be either happy or unhappy because we are better or worse off relatively. This happiness is seen to be only short-lived because we adjust standards. Hence the comparison view predicts that we soon feel the other way. 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, or even unhappy because we came to expect continuous progress. The same applies to comparisons with expectations and aspirations. It is thus implied that happy and unhappy periods will success each other through our life, and that in the general population the number of happy and unhappy people will tend to match each other, this implications is known as the zero sum prediction. See i.e. Unger (1970) for a formal statement. For a long time, this implication has been held to be true. Yet the last few decades' empirical happiness research has shown that it simply is false.

Evidence to the contrary: The claim that happiness oscillates around zero has been considered in longitudinal studies on both overall life-satisfaction and hedonic affect. If happiness oscillates around zero the retest 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 claimed to have found evidence for cyclical variation in hedonic level (Hersey 1932, Morgan 1934). However, more sophisticated studies carried out later did not reproduce that pattern. Over a six week period, Wessman & Ricks (1966:63) found neither alternating fluctuations nor a balance of positive and negative affect. A similar result is reported by Fordyce (1972:151/3).

Representative surveys find that the great majority of the population claims to enjoy life more or less. Only in very poor countries does the number of unhappy citizens equal 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 many objections: Not only from proponents of the 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. Such distortions do occur to a modest extent, but are certainly not the rule. (Veenhoven 1984a, ch. 3). The best evidence comes from time-sampling studies of hedonic level. Such studies are the least open to desirability distortion. They nevertheless show pleasant experience to dominate, (i.e. Kirchler 1984).

Another attempt to save the zero-sum claim was made by Parducci (1965, 1968) who claims that, when comparing themselves to average citizens, 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 against 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 some truth in this theory, it can hardly explain the overwhelming dominance of happiness that has been observed. The bias involved is a minor one and is moreover likely to neutralize itself, because it can work both ways.

To sum up: The zero-sum prediction - implied in the contentment view - is not confirmed by the facts.

2.4 Do people know why they are happy or not?

If happiness results largely from more or less conscious comparison of the realities of ones life to aspirations, we can expect people to know fairly well why they are happy or not. Not only should

they have an opinion but they should also attribute correctly. These predictions can be checked as well.

Let us first of all establish that people do not always know why they are unhappy. Complaints about 'unreasonable' depression and dissatisfaction are in fact common in clinical psychology. Are these exceptions to the rule that normal people know quite well? Unfortunately we don't know. Representative surveys have involved questions about the sources of one's own happiness but these items do not invite the report of uncertainty. Respondents are typically confronted with a checklist containing things such as 'health', 'family' and 'income' and are asked to mark the most relevant ones. Response categories like 'don't know' and 'no answer' are not provided.

Still we can check whether the reasons mentioned are in fact the things that actually appear to affect happiness. We can do so by comparing the factors marked as important to the factors that appear to be strongly correlated to happiness in the population at hand. If factors mentioned are typically the best correlating factors we can be reasonably sure that people attribute their happiness correctly: If not, misattribution is likely to be involved.

Going through the available data we meet with two examples of a good fit between attributions and correlations. The Dutch rank 'health' high as a source of their happiness and health is in fact firmly correlated with happiness in the Netherlands. 'Marriage' ranks high as well and is also among the strongest correlates of happiness (both being married as-such and quality of marriage).

Yet we also meet with cases of misattribution. A clear example is the case of 'income'. The Dutch also mention this factor as an important source of their happiness, but we have seen in [exhibit 4](#) that income difference hardly matters for happiness in present day Dutch society. Another case is 'children'. Both Americans and the Dutch think that the presence of children contributes to a happier life. Yet having children appears rather slightly detrimental to happiness in these countries, probably because it burdens marriage.

These latter two cases suggest that happiness attributions depend on current stereotypes rather than on own experience. It is not unlikely that the former two cases of correct attribution (health, and marriage) depend on stereotypes as well. Stereotypes often rightly depict reality. Yet they are vulnerable for desirability distortion (as in the case of children) and may persist in spite of changed conditions (as probably in the case of the income factor: Income was actually related to happiness in Dutch society twenty years ago.) If people do indeed rely on stereotypes, they apparently lack sufficiently clear cues in their own experience. Happiness is then unlikely to be a matter of conscious comparison only.

To sum up: Contrary to prediction of the contentment view, people don't always know why they are happy or not. Both uncertainty and misattribution seem fairly common.

3 DISCUSSION

Each for themselves these pieces of evidence cannot decide the issue, but together they strongly suggest that the evaluation of life does involve more than just comparing aspirations and achievements. Does that mean that it also draws on affective experience, as suggested by the enjoyment-view? Not necessarily so: Rejection of the former hypothesis does not imply acceptance of the latter. Still there are other reasons to assume that we do take generalized affect into account when we draw a balance of life.

3.1 Hedonic level of affect involved

First of all it is quite plausible that we regard affective experience: In fact it is hard to see how we could disregard it.

Inclusion of affective cues in the evaluation of life is the more probable if we accept the common theory that the main biological function of affects is to 'guide' the organism. Many potentially harmful behaviors are linked to unpleasant affect and are discouraged in this way (e.g. climbing in very high trees, isolating oneself socially). On the other hand biologically adaptive behaviors tend to be linked with positive affect and sustained in this way (e.g. eating, social interaction, and curiosity). In this vein Arnold (1960:86) characterized hedonic experience 'as the intuitive appraisal that something is either good or bad for us'. Fryda 1986: 464 calls it a 'signal' that alerts the organism to its malfunctioning or well-functioning. Obviously nature could not preprogram us for all situations. Hence it is likely that only the most basic requirements for functioning are safeguarded in this way. These are what we usually refer to as 'basic needs'. Specific emotions tend to be related to specific needs and behaviors, such as sex and aggression. Generalized hedonic experience rather signals overall need gratification. It thus signals even needs of which we are not aware consciously. As such hedonic level is a valuable piece of information that we cannot easily ignore. It is therefore quite probable that the conscious evaluation of life tends to be heavily colored by hedonic experience.

This theory of hedonic experience fits fairly well with the earlier observation that people are typically happy rather than neutral. When the human machinery functions properly the green light of pleasant affect is on, signaling that we can go on. It also fits the observation that happiness is low in the very poor countries: Where people chronically lack food and safety, the alarm signal of negative affect goes on.

There is also empirical evidence: We have seen that overall happiness is strongly related to hedonic level. As we found similar correlations in different countries, that is probably a universal pattern.

3.2 Two sources of information

This all suggests that there is truth in both earlier mentioned views of happiness. Apparently we use both comparisons and affects in evaluating life. Both these sources provide unique information. Comparisons tell us whether better conditions are in reach and hedonic affect signals whether basic needs are sufficiently gratified. Each for themselves these pieces of information are insufficient for successful adaptation. If we had to orient on socially constructed standards only, we would probably violate the bio-psychological requirements implied in our nature. If we oriented on hedonic signals only we would probably settle for less than possible and live still in the bushes. In combination both pieces of information provide a useful adaptive compass however.

3.3 Situational cues involved as well?

The above view suggests that the evaluation of life draws on aggregated information rather than on incidental cues. In that respect it does not fit experiments by Schwarz and Strack which showed marked effects on self ratings of happiness by situational cues such as the weather, confrontation with a disabled person or recall of a pleasant event. Does that mean that incidents serve as third source? Certainly not in the same way. People do not orient on incidents in drawing the balance of their life, but environmental cues may nevertheless influence the selection of things that come to their mind. This effect is probably more powerful when people give an instant judgment in an experiment than when they consider their life for themselves. The effects are also likely to be short-lived and produce a zone of inaccuracy rather than really influencing happiness in the long run.

4 CONCLUSION

Happiness is not merely contentment. In evaluating our life we draw on two sources of information. Comparisons inform us about the possibilities of improving our situation. Hedonic level signals the degree to which the present situation fits our nature. Each for themselves these pieces of information are insufficient for successful adaptation but together they provide a useful existential compass.

EXHIBIT 1

Correlations of overall happiness and contentment in national samples

<i>Indicator of Contentment</i>	<i>Indicator of Happiness</i>	<i>Correlation</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Source</i>
Unfulfilled aspirations (mentioned in response to open question)	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	G = + .23	USA 1946	Wessman 1956:216
How successful have you been in achieving your goals in life?	Rate your present life on ladder ranging from 10 (best possible) to 0 (worst possible)	r = + .39	USA 1960	Cantril 1965:269
How are you doing in getting the things you want from life? (very well, not too well)	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	G = + .66	USA 1963	Brenner 1967:671
How are you doing in getting the things you want from life? (very well, not too well)	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	G = +.70	USA 1965	Bradburn 1969:51

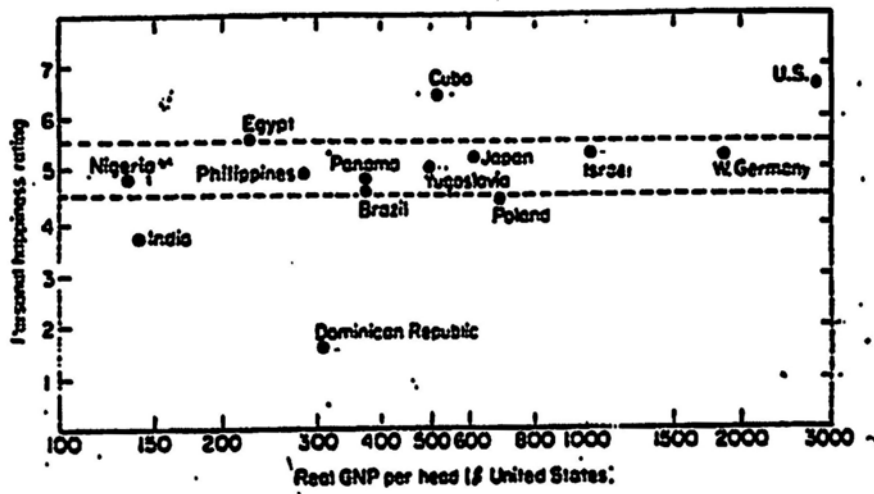
EXHIBIT 2**Correlations of overall happiness and hedonic level of affect in national samples**

<i>Indicator of hedonic level</i>	<i>Indicator of happiness</i>	<i>Correlations</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Source</i>
Affect Balance *	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	$r = +.41$	EC 1981	Halman 1987:210
Affect Balance *	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole now?	$r = +.45$	EC 1981	Halman 1987:210
Affect Balance *	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	$G = + .45$	USA 1965	Bradburn 1969:63/8
Affect Balance *	How do you feel about your life as a whole: delighted/terrible	$r = + .48$	USA 1972	Andrews 1974:15
Affect Balance *	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	$G = + .51$	Puerto Rico 1964	Hatlin 1966:10/3
How do you feel most of the time?	Taking everything together: How happy would you say you are?	$\tau = +.77$	Israel 1973	Levy 1975:372
How do you feel most of the time?	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole?	$\tau = +.71$	Israel 1973	Levy 1975:372

* The Affect Balance Scale consists of 10 statements about experienced affect in the last few weeks: 5 positive and 5 negative. The Affect Balance Scale marks the degree to which positive experience outweigh negative ones (Bradburn 1969)

Exhibit 3

a: Easterlin's presentation (Easterlin, 1974, p. 106)



b: my presentation (based on the same data)

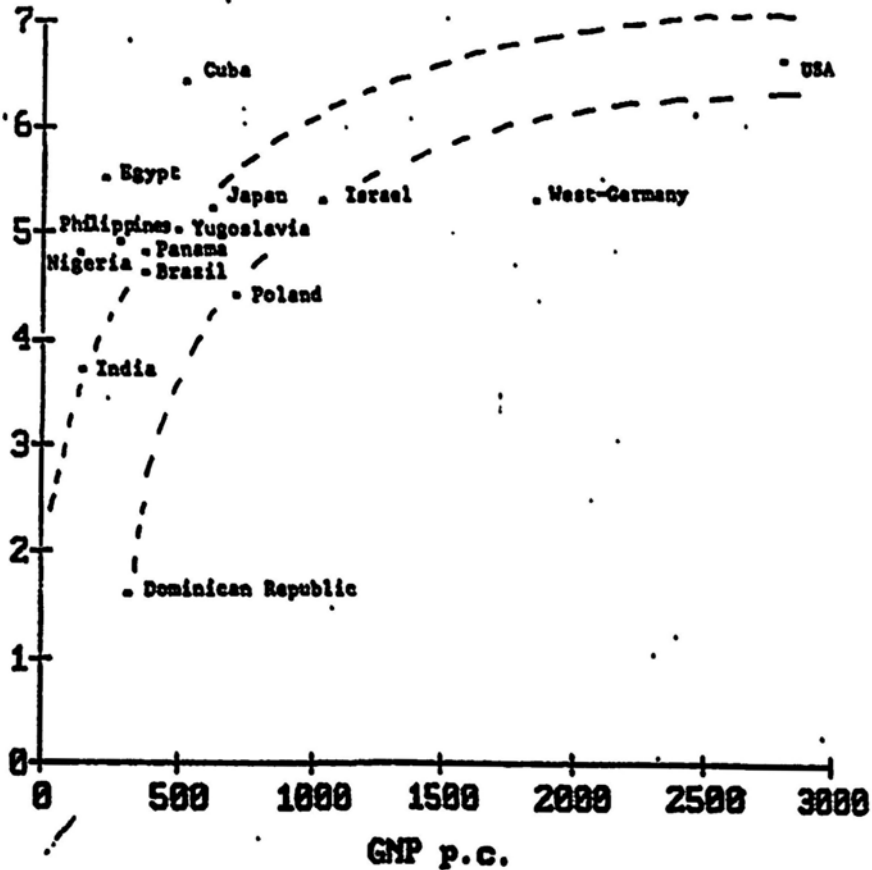
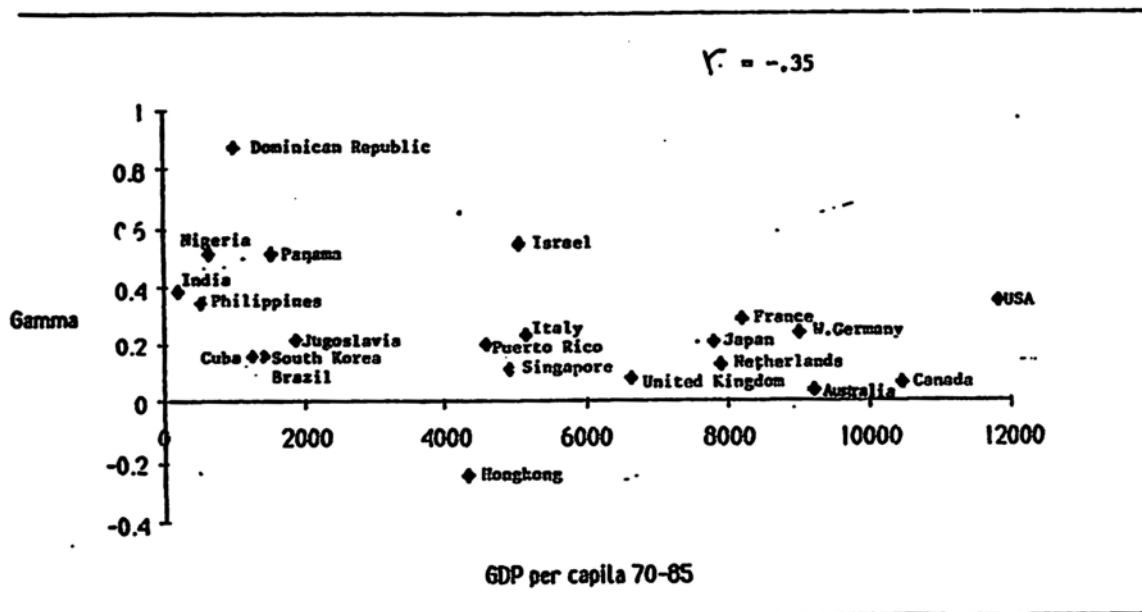


Exhibit 4

Association between individual income and happiness in 22 countries of varying wealth



Correlation in Gamma

Source: Veenhovens Database of Happiness