

# QUESTIONS ON HAPPINESS

## Classical topics, modern answers, blind spots

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Happiness is a longstanding theme in Western thought. It came under scrutiny in the following three periods: (1) Antique Greek philosophy; (2) Post-Enlightenment West-European moral philosophy, Utilitarianism in particular; and (3) Current Quality-of-Life research in the rich welfare states. Printed reflections on all this contemplation now fill a hundred meters of bookshelves.

This paper takes stock of the progress made on seven classical topics. Are we now any wiser? Or is Dodge (1930) right in his contention that “the theory of the happy life has remained on about the same level that the ancient Greeks left it”? This inventory will differ from the usual review articles. The focus will not be on current technical research issues, but rather on the broader questions that prompted the enquiry. Furthermore, the aim is not only to enumerate advances in understanding, but also to mark the blind spots.

The following issues will be considered:

1. What is happiness?
2. Can happiness be measured?
3. Is unhappiness the rule?
4. How do people assess their happiness?
5. What conditions favour happiness?
6. Can happiness be promoted?
7. Should happiness be promoted?

These scientific issues do not emerge in a social vacuum, but are rooted in broader moral and political debates. Questions 1 and 7 are part of an ongoing ethical discussion about value priorities. Which values should guide us? How should we rank values such as “wisdom”, “equality”, “justice”, “freedom” and “happiness”? Together with question 5, these issues also figure in the related political debates about socio-economic priorities. Should the emphasis be on national economic growth or on individual wellbeing? Who are the deprived in our society? How can their suffering best be reduced?

Questions 2 to 6 further link up with the discussion about the possibilities and dangers of socio-political technocracy. Will our understanding of human and social functioning ever

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allow the deduction of optimal policies? Will the political system ever be able to put such policies into practice? If so, will not the remedy be worse than the disease, and bring about a “Brave New World”? Questions 3 to 6 relate to the broad argument between pessimists and optimists. They are all issues in the discussion as to whether current society is rotten or not, and whether social development holds any promise for a better one. Questions 4 and 5 are relevant in the debate on human nature. Is happiness the result of rational consideration or of following blind instincts? Has human happiness anything to do with the real good or can we be happy in any condition? Finally, question 3 is an issue in the ongoing discussion about the legitimacy of the political order. If most people feel happy under the current regime, why change it? For that reason, conservatives tend to claim that we are happy, while revolutionaries try to prove we are not.

## 2. WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

The history of happiness research is the history of confusion. The term has carried many different meanings and this has hindered productive thinking enormously. Nowadays, the discussion has largely escaped from this deadlock. In fact, the greatest advance achieved is at the conceptual level.

Part of the problem is not specific to the subject matter but results from the variety of meanings the term happiness has in common language. Because of the lack of conceptual discipline, that confusion of tongues has been continued into the scientific debate. An additional problem is that the seemingly technical discussion about the proper use of words in fact covers up an ideological debate about value priorities. In many arguments the term “happiness” is used as a synonym for “the good”. “Defining” happiness is then propagating an ideology. Therefore, a consensus on the use of the word has never emerged.

### *Recent conceptual differentiation*

In the 1950s the use of concepts such as “welfare”, “adjustment” and “mental health” had much in common with the traditional confusion about “happiness”. Yet in the last few decades social scientists have largely escaped from these deadlocks and have thereby allowed a breakthrough in the conceptualization of happiness. It is now generally agreed that there are many varieties of goodness, which do not necessarily concur. A classification of current concepts is presented by [Scheme 2.1](#).

The reader should bear in mind that the enumeration is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Furthermore, most of the terms mentioned are used with other meanings as well and could therefore be classified differently. Elsewhere I have elaborated this classification in more detail (Veenhoven, 1980).

### *Focus on life satisfaction*

This paper will focus on happiness in the sense of life satisfaction. We cannot answer the seven questions for all concepts. Therefore, a choice is required. I choose the overall self-appraisal of life for four reasons: (1) This concept can be fairly precisely defined (see below); (2) the phenomenon thus defined can be measured fairly well (to be demonstrated in the next paragraph); (3) there are empirical data on this matter which allow answers to the questions raised; (4) focusing on an “objective” conception of happiness would involve a priori answers to several of the questions under discussion.

Life satisfaction is conceived 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. The term “happiness” will be used as a synonym.

Next to this “overall” evaluation, this paper will refer to two aspect appraisals of life-as-a-whole an affective aspect (hedonic level) and a cognitive aspect (contentment). Hedonic level is the degree to which the various affects a person experiences are pleasant; in other words: how well he usually feels. Contentment is the degree to which an individual perceives his aspirations to have been met. In other words: to what extent one perceives oneself to have got what one wants in life. These distinctions will prove fruitful in answering the questions asked here. The concepts are described in more detail in Veenhoven, 1984a, chapter 2.

### 3. CAN HAPPINESS BE MEASURED?

During the last century frequent discussions have taken place as to whether happiness can be measured. These debates were part of the discussion about the utilitarian moral philosophy, which required some kind of hedonic bookkeeping in order to assess the happiness revenues of alternative courses of action. A great deal of that discussion is not relevant for this paper, because it concerns conceptions other than life-satisfaction.

When happiness polls began to be used during the last few decades, the discussion focused on whether subjective appreciation of life can be assessed validly. The following issues figured in that discussion: (1) Can happiness be measured “objectively” or only “subjectively” by questioning? (2) If questioning is the only way, do interviews tap an existing state of mind or do they merely invite a guess? (3) If people do indeed have an idea about their enjoyment of life, do their responses to questions reflect that idea adequately? These questions have instigated a great deal of empirical research and can now be fairly well answered.

#### 3.1 Assessment by observation

“Measurement” was long understood as “objective”, “external” assessment, analogous to the measurement of blood-pressure by a doctor. It is now clear that life satisfaction cannot be measured that way. Steady physiological concomitants have not been discovered and modern insights into the complexity of psycho-physiological interactions do not suggest that they ever will be. Neither have any overt behaviours been found to be linked reliably to inner enjoyment of life. Like all attitudes, happiness is reflected only partly in social behaviour. Though an “active”, “outgoing” and “friendly” appearance is more frequent among the happy, it is observed among unhappy persons as well. Even unconscious body language has been found to be only weakly related to the inner appreciation of life (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, p. 244). Consequently, ratings of someone’s happiness by his peers or teachers are only weakly related to self-reports (research reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984a, pp. 83—84). The case of suicide was long considered to be an exception. This kind of behaviour was thought to indicate extreme unhappiness. However, the abundant research in that field has made it clear that dissatisfaction with life is at best one of the motives and that there is a great cultural and personal variation in one’s capacity to cope with unhappiness, other than by committing suicide.

### 3.2 Assessment by questioning

Inference from overt behaviour being impossible, we must make do with questioning: either direct or indirect and in a personal interview or by an anonymous questionnaire. Great doubts have been expressed about the validity of such self-reports of happiness. However, empirical checks of these suspicions have not revealed great distortions (see Chapter 3 for a different perspective)

One of the doubts raised is that most people would have no opinion at all about their life satisfaction. Answers to questions on that subject would reflect other things: in particular prevailing norms of self-presentation. However, people appear to be quite aware of their enjoyment of life. Eight out of ten Americans think of it once a week or more often (Shaver and Freedman, 1975, p. 70). Consequently, responses on happiness items tend to be prompt, the non-response is low and temporal stability high. Stereotypical responses are not the rule (evidence reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984, pp. 40 - 42).

It is often claimed that people present themselves happier than - deep in their heart - they know they are. Both ego-defensive and social desirability effects would be involved. This distortion should give itself away in the often observed overrepresentation of “very happy” people, in the fact that most people perceived themselves happier than average and in the finding that psychosomatic complaints are not uncommon among persons who characterize themselves as being happy. Yet these facts provide no proof. As we will see in the next paragraph, it is quite comprehensible that a positive appreciation of life prevails. There are also reasons why most people could honestly imagine themselves happier than average, and reasons why the presence of psychosomatic complaints does not exclude a positive appreciation of life. The proof of the pudding is a demonstration of distortion itself. Several clinical studies have tried to do so, but failed to find evidence for a general overstatement of happiness (research reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984a, pp. 44-51).

Although there is no proof of systematic desirability distortion, there is evidence that responses to questions on happiness are liable to various situational influences, such as the site of the interview, the interviewer, the weather, one’s mood, etc. (see Chapter 3). These differences can be considered as essentially random error, because they tend to disappear in repeated observations of the usual one-time-one-item measurement. More systematic measurement error is involved as well. Responses are influenced by the precise wording of questions, answer formats, sequence of questions and context of the interview (see Strack and Martin, 1987).

Andrews and Whitley (1976, p. 216) estimated that error produces about half the variance in happiness reports. Several reasons for this vulnerability seem to be involved. Firstly, some people may not have a definite opinion in mind and engage in an instant (re)assessment which is then influenced by situational characteristics (see Chapter 3). Secondly, those who do have a definite opinion will mostly hold a rather global idea of how happy they are and will not think in terms of a ten points scale. Hence, their precise score may vary. Thirdly, the process of retrieval involves some uncertainty as well.

## 4. IS UNHAPPINESS THE RULE?

Social critics of all times have bemoaned the miseries of life. Most people are believed to be basically dissatisfied and real enjoyment of life is to be projected in past paradise or future utopia. Such claims have always been denounced by optimists but the discussion has always

been inconclusive. During the last few decades many surveys have been carried out (see Chapter 13), some drawing on world samples: so is it now finally possible to draw a conclusion?

The first representative surveys were carried out in Western countries and showed an uneven distribution of happy and unhappy citizens: the happy outweighing the unhappy by about 3 to 1. This finding raised much doubt about the validity of survey questions (discussed earlier). Later cross-national studies have reproduced this pattern in less affluent non-Western countries as well, but not in the Third World nations where a large proportion of the population lives at subsistence levels (see [Scheme 2.2](#) (Veenhoven 1984a)). This latter finding took away many of the validity doubts: a universal tendency to claim happiness in the face of misery is not involved.

Various social critics have discounted such findings as sullen adjustment. Rather than really enjoying their life, people would just give up hope for a better one and try to make the best of it (e.g. Ipsen, 1978, p.49). Various defensive strategies would be used for that purpose: simple denial of one's misery; downward comparison (Wills, 1981) and a tendency to see things rosier than they are (Ostrook and Snyder, 1982). This view is supported in experiments suggesting "depressive realism" (Alloy and Abramson, 1979). Two counter-arguments can be mentioned:

(1) Such resignation must give itself away in a discrepancy between the "constructed" judgment of life and "raw" affective experience: in my terms between "overall happiness" and "hedonic level". Hedonic level is less vulnerable to cognitive adaptation, because it is a direct experience and is less open to defensive distortion, because it is less threatening to admit that one feels bad sometimes than to admit to being disappointed in life. Various surveys in Western nations have assessed both overall happiness and hedonic level and found these highly correlated (research reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984a pp. 106 - 113).<sup>1</sup> Studies focusing on daily variations in mood have also found that pleasant affect dominates unpleasant affect (e.g., Bless and Schwarz, 1984 for a meta-analysis of eighteen studies).

(2) Elaborate comparisons between actual living conditions and subjective appreciation of life have shown that the pattern of high life satisfaction in the face of relatively bad living conditions is the exception rather than the rule (Glatzer and Zapf, 1984, pp. 282—397).

Together these findings suggest that people tend to enjoy their lives once conditions are not too bad. From an adaptive biological point of view this does not seem strange. Nature is unlikely to have burdened us with characteristic unhappiness, because evolution is unlikely to result in a species that does not fit its characteristic environment subjectively. Like "health", happiness would seem to be a normal condition.

One argument for this latter theory is that happiness has a certain survival value. As we will see in more detail later, enjoyment of life fosters "activity", strengthens "social bonds" and preserves "health".

There is a little evidence for a biological substrate of this capacity for happiness. In the human brain more areas seem to produce positive experiences than negative ones (25 per cent to 5 per cent, according to Fordyce, 1975, p. 191).

The prevalence of satisfaction with life-as-a-whole does not wash away the multitude of suffering and complaints. As noted in the foregoing paragraphs, even the happy are not without complaints. The German Welfare Survey, conducted in 1978, found that half of the "highly satisfied" report frequent worries (Glatzer and Zapf, 1984, p. 180).

If not due to response distortion, what else can explain these anomalies? One first thing to note is that happiness and complaining do not exclude each other logically. One can be fairly satisfied with life as a whole, but still be aware of serious deficits. In fact, both stem from a reflection on life. Secondly, bad feelings and perception of problems may to some extent contribute to overall happiness. Only through realistic acknowledgement of pains can people cope effectively with the problems of life and thereby maintain a positive overall balance.

## 5. HOW DO PEOPLE ASSESS THEIR HAPPINESS?

What goes on in people when they evaluate their life? This inner manufacturing of happiness is a subject full of controversies: whether happiness is the product of “thinking” or of “emotion”; whether it is a “state” or a “trait”; whether it results entirely from “comparison” or results from the gratification of “needs”, etc. The issue was a major theme in antique philosophy about happiness and enjoys a renewed interest nowadays. It is not just curiosity about the inside of the black box that draws one’s attention, but rather the far-reaching consequences of the different points of view. If happiness were indeed to result entirely from comparison, it is likely to be essentially relative and hence insensitive to ameliorations of the (objective) quality of life. A better society will not make happier people. If happiness is a fixed “disposition”, efforts to improve living conditions will not contribute to greater enjoyment either. However, if happiness draws on “need satisfaction”, there is a point in trying to identify basic human urges and to facilitate their fulfillment. If personal cognitive “constructs” are involved, we might sometimes relieve suffering by changes in thinking.

The discussion has yielded many facts and a lot of theories, which are difficult to oversee. A simple partition may help to sketch the field. Most questions and speculations about the inner fabrication of happiness concern mental processes. Yet it is widely acknowledged that a physical substrate is involved as well. Likewise, most of the discussion focuses on the processes that produce variable states, while there is no doubt that processes of stabilization into traits are involved as well. Together these two distinctions produce the four cell scheme in [Scheme 2.3](#). It allows an ordering of issues, provides a view on current emphasis and may to some extent correspond with the realities involved.

Traditionally, the processes in cell 1 of the scheme have received the most attention, in particular the cognitive processes of comparison and making overall judgments. The growth of cognitive psychology in the last few decades has triggered a great deal of new ideas on these matters. Theories on (social) comparison have been refined and new perspectives have been opened on how people may put things together. Elsewhere I have reviewed current views (Veenhoven, 1989). The mental mechanisms that underlie the emergence of (raw) pleasant affect are still largely a mystery.

Less progress has been made in answering the questions in cell 2. The classical trait-state discussion still drags on: nowadays mostly presented as the bottom-up/top-down controversy. At the empirical level remarkable demonstrations have been provided for both views, yet understanding has advanced little, attention being focused too much on either/or answers.

Consideration of the conditions in which appraisals of life “freeze” and “unfreeze” would seem to be more productive. It could draw on a wide body of knowledge about attitude formation and personality.

The physiology of happiness depicted in cell 3 is still largely terra incognita. In the 1960s the discovery of pleasure centers in the brain seemed to promise a breakthrough (Olds, 1956). That promise has become somewhat bleak by now. There are more than one pleasure centers and their links with thinking and experience remain unclear. Pharmacological research has not yet resulted in great progress either. Various mood elevating chemicals have been identified but their working is only dimly understood.

The issues in cell 4 are generally acknowledged as highly relevant but empirical research on the matter is difficult and expensive. The 1930s witnessed some minor attempts to demonstrate temperamental differences in happiness proneness. In the last decade more serious research has been launched in the related field of depression in the tradition of “biological psychiatry”. With the exception of “manic depression”, no clear biological basis has been identified as yet.

## 6. WHAT CONDITIONS FAVOUR HAPPINESS?

This question lies at the heart of various moral and political debates. What lifestyle is most satisfying in the long run? What society allows the greatest happiness for the greatest number? Scientific answers could provide the consensus ideologists fail to achieve and could legitimize social reform. Although quite relevant, the study of conditions for happiness is still in its infancy. As yet at least one thousand empirical studies have considered the differences between happy and unhappy persons. Elsewhere I have reported a synthesis part of that research (Veenhoven, 1984a and 1984b). This analysis concerned 245 studies in 32 countries.

At the risk of simplifying too much, one could characterize the results as follows: happy persons are more likely to be found in the economically prosperous countries, where freedom and democracy are held in respect and the political scene is stable. The happy are more likely to be found in majority groups than among minorities and more often at the top of the social ladder than at the bottom. They are typically married and get on well with families and friends. In respect of their personal characteristics, the happy appear relatively healthy, both physically and mentally. They are active and openminded. They feel they are in control of their lives. Their aspirations concern social and moral matters rather than money making. In matter of politics the happy tend to be at the conservative side of the middle.

Do these findings allow a conclusion in the above mentioned debates? Unfortunately they do not, at least not yet. The following limitations stand in the way: The variables related to happiness as yet are largely easy to measure. Several equally relevant variables are absent: probably because of methodical problems. One such white spot is the “cultural climate” in society: the “meaning” the prevailing belief system provides; the “expression” it allows; the amount of “conformism” it requires, etc. At the individual level we miss data on various antecedents of happiness such as: “style of upbringing” and “stress in early youth”.

Most of the studies are simple, correlational ones. The statistical relations they yield can be artifactual. In particular spurious distortion can be involved: e.g. when happiness appears

related to income, that may be due to the fact that the happy tend to be better educated, rather than from a genuine effect of income. Only some of the studies have checked such distortions systematically.

### *Uncertainty about causal effects*

Correlates of happiness are generally considered as “causes” of happiness. Yet statistical links can result from reversed effects as well. If happiness appears related to income, this cannot just be interpreted as signifying that a good income contributes to the appreciation of life. Happiness could affect income level as well: e.g. because enjoyment of life stimulates “energy” and “doing”. Unraveling causes and effects is difficult and often not feasible. It requires longitudinal and experimental studies, which are rare in this field.

Investigators typically aim at identifying “the” conditions for happiness. However, the assumption of general “laws” is not very fruitful. By bitter experience we have learned that many of the regularities we observe are highly conditional. The field of happiness research is no exception. The best way to identify such contextual variations is to perform large longitudinal and cross-national surveys. A meta-analysis of existing data is a cheap alternative.

## **7. CAN HAPPINESS BE RAISED?**

Much of all this consideration of happiness is prompted by the hope of finding ways to a more satisfying life. Traditionally, moral philosophers have sought guidelines at the individual level. Which life goals are most gratifying in the long run? What lifestyle most satisfying? What character tendencies harm happiness, what traits should be cultivated? Currently the emphasis is on the collective level. What should governments do to allow their citizens the best life? What socio-economic and educational policies have the highest happiness revenues?

Yet many people doubt whether happiness levels can be changed at all. This doubt is rooted in the belief that happiness is too variable and elusive to allow manipulation, and in theories about happiness which imply that it cannot be changed anyway.

### **7.1 Can happiness be influenced at all?**

Two theories of happiness imply that enduring change is not possible. Attempts to improve happiness would be in vain.

#### *Zero sum?*

One theory is that happiness is cyclical: happy periods are always followed by unhappy periods. In the longer run these swings are believed to neutralize each other (zero sum). Hence, attempts to improve happiness may lengthen or heighten a positive swing, but their effect is invariably nullified by a depression soon after. This classic idea has been reinvented by Unger (1970) and figures currently in a psycho-physical form in Solomon's (1980) Opponent-Process Theory. This theory does not apply to happiness as defined here.

This theory does not apply to happiness as defined here. Observations of mood and life satisfaction across time do not show any cyclical pattern (e.g. Fordyce, 1972, pp. 151-153).

Neither has the zero sum prediction been proved true. As we have seen previously, most people feel positive about their life rather than neutral.

*Fixed trait?*

The other theory is that happiness does not even vary in the short run, but remains the same throughout life. This inertia has been attributed to neurological make up as well as to processes of attitudinal stabilization. The latter view has already been discussed.

As we have seen there, appreciation of life indeed tends to change little through adulthood. Yet high stability observed in most cases does not imply inchangeability at all times. Firstly, we must keep in mind that the investigations concerned elderly populations. Happiness is probably less stable in adolescence and young adulthood, when living conditions are more variable and opinions about life less crystallized. Secondly, various studies have shown that happiness is not left unaffected by major life changes. Thirdly, the investigations figure in a socio-historical context characterized by stability. Things might have been different if a Third World War had taken place in the sixties.

Rather than saying happiness “is” fixed, we should say that it “tends to get” fixed. In adolescence and young adulthood the attitude towards life is likely to be most open to change. In later phases of life it is likely to change only under the pressure of rather drastic life changes, especially if these involve a wider reorientation of the self.

## 7.2 Can happiness be learned?

Since antiquity there have been books on how to become happier. Since the 1970s happiness-trainings have appeared on the scene (*inter alia*, Fordyce, 1977). Both presume that happiness can be learned. A common objection to these practices is that the rather uniform recipes involved do not work, mostly because people are too different. A second objection is that good advice seldom works, people being too inflexible, the unhappy in particular.

Antique moral philosophers mostly recommend a sober and contemplative lifestyle, a positive philosophy of life and a disciplined character. Nowadays, that idea is still held in respect in that various “learned” qualities are believed to predispose one for a happy life. However, current opinion holds that there is no one “ideal” model. Rather, present-day pedagogues, educationalists and therapists emphasize that developmental goals must be tailored to personal preferences and capacities and situational opportunities. Individual trainings are better suited to that purpose than general books of good advice.

Irrespective of these possibilities for individual treatment, there are many learnable qualities that generally predispose one to lead a happy life. “Ignorance”, “hate” and “lack of control” will at least reduce chances for gratifying experiences in most cases. Not only does human nature set universal developmental demands (e.g. the innate need for contact requiring sociability), but also general existential conditions (we must all live with others and therefore need capacities to establish stable relations). Empirical identification of such generally useful qualities is possible. As we have seen previously, empirical happiness research has considered various personality and lifestyle variables. Characteristics found over-represented among the happy are: “identity integrity”, “ego-strength”, “mental maturity”, “inner control”, “social ability”, “activity” and “perceptual openness”. Not surprisingly, these characteristics are typical concomitants of mental health, and goals in many psychotherapies.

Antique prescriptions are confirmed in that material aspirations appear under-represented among the happy. However, the classic notion that sober and planned living is most rewarding is not confirmed, nor the idea that intelligence and psychological differentiation favour happiness.

The classical prescriptions for greater happiness by personal improvement presumed “rational” people, who are both willing and able to change themselves. Their critics have argued that stupidity and inflexibility are rather the rule. Moreover, personality building is largely accomplished in early youth within the uncontrollable realm of the family, leaving only marginal room for psychological engineering by formal institutions such as schools and mental health care. Several facts can be introduced to support these arguments: e.g. the earlier mentioned finding that happiness tends to be remarkably stable and the common lamentation that psychotherapy does not work.

There is certainly a great deal of truth in these objections, but the point should not be exaggerated. Firstly, research has shown that special educational programs can foster the development of desirable characteristics such as self-esteem, autonomy and control. Secondly, psychotherapy has proved to work for at least some kinds of problems. Thirdly, the early socialization in families is not entirely “uncontrolled”, but figures in the context of a belief system that is not entirely insensitive to influence.

The proof of the pudding is of course experimental demonstration. During the last decade a few small-scale experiments have been reported. Firstly, several experiments checked whether happiness can be raised by the teaching of specific qualities, such as focusing on “satisfying activities” (Reich and Zautra, 1981), “reviewing one’s life” (Fergusson, 1980), “assertiveness” (Johnson, 1981) and “cognitive self-control” (Jeziarsky, 1982). The observed effects on happiness are generally small or nonexistent. Secondly, some studies on the effectiveness of general psychotherapy programs have considered happiness as one of the outcome variables (e.g. Morgan, 1978; O’Dowd, 1978; Naskeff, 1980). Slight positive effects appear. Lastly, two comprehensive attempts to influence happiness by cognitive retraining have been reported (Lichter *et al.*, 1980; Fordyce, 1977). These “happiness courses” required subjects to practice self-suggestion of happiness, to lower their aspirations and to engage more in behaviour already proven to be beneficial, such as socializing. Experimental groups showed improvement in happiness over control groups. None of these follow ups cover more than a few months. Hence, it is not yet clear whether happiness can be boosted permanently in this way.

### 7.3 Can social improvements raise happiness?

The expectation that planned social improvements can raise human happiness is one of the ideological foundations of current welfare states. Yet this idea is subject to much doubt. Sociologists have objected that planned improvement of society is illusional, the political process being irrational (VanDoorn and Schuyt, 1978). Psychologists have added that possible improvements do not materialize in greater satisfaction. Firstly, social “improvements” would be largely irrelevant, happiness drawing on “inner” sources rather than on “outer” ones. Secondly, relevant improvements would often be nullified by social comparison processes. Thirdly, the few possible gains would soon be washed away by the inevitable adjustment of standards. Below I will consider these claims in more detail.

*Conditions irrelevant?*

Down the ages mystics and ascetics have preached that happiness cannot be found in the outside world, but depends entirely on one's "inner life". Currently this view is echoed in interpretations of modern empirical research, in particular the finding that happiness tends to be quite stable through time and that happiness relates more strongly to psychological variables than to socio-economic ones (as discussed previously).

Yet these results can be interpreted in a different way: as argued earlier, the apparent stability of happiness does not imply that it is entirely insensitive to weal and woe. Further, low correlations with some socio-economic variables do not mean that external conditions are always irrelevant to happiness. As we have seen, bad economic conditions in most African and Asian countries have a devastating effect on happiness. Moreover, there are more "outer" conditions than just "economic affluence" and "social position": the political system under which one lives; macro-cultural traits such as current beliefs and modes of expression; interpersonal networks, etc. These conditions do appear important, the latter in particular. Happiness depends heavily on ties with spouse, family and friends, in Western societies especially (research reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984a, pp. 232 - 258).

Apart from these empirical proofs to the contrary, the idea that outer conditions do not count must be rejected on other grounds as well: stable attitudes towards life, once established, may be largely insensitive to living conditions, but while being established they clearly depend on them. Likewise, the effect on happiness of "inner" sources such as wisdom and vigour depends largely on their interaction with "outer" variables: they enable the individual to cope more effectively with the problems of life. Again it is also unlikely that the human species could have survived if its happiness were unresponsive to the environment.

*Social comparison only?*

Another objection is that the appreciation of life would depend on the degree to which one considers oneself to be "better off" than other people. Then all-round improvement would not contribute to happiness: the distance to reference persons would remain the same. Several striking findings have been interpreted as proof of this theory: e.g. the finding that Americans did not become much happier in the post-war decades in spite of doubling of income per head (Easterlin, 1974) and the observation that seriously handicapped persons maintain a reasonable appreciation of life by comparing themselves to fellow sufferers (Cameron, Van Harck, and Kostin, 1971).

There is little doubt (though no convincing proof) that social comparisons are involved in the evaluation of life, but the available data also make clear that their effect is not all important. Firstly, Michalos (1985) has demonstrated that more standards of comparison are involved than just social ones. In fact, comparisons to other persons appear to be not even the most important standard. Further, there is evidence that they affect happiness only in specific conditions, e.g. when differences are regarded as unjustified (Glatzer and Zapf, 1984, p. 242). Secondly, we have seen earlier that the evaluation of life also draws on affective experience, which is largely dependent on the gratification of basic biopsychological needs. These needs are essentially non-relative. Consequently, serious deprivations at this level by "war", "hunger" and "social disorganization" do lower the enjoyment of life drastically, notwithstanding the fact that everybody is hurt equally (evi-

dence reviewed in Veenhoven, 1984, p. 400).

As in the above case, one could ask how evolution could possibly have resulted in a way of assessing life that fixes the individual on surpassing his fellow beings rather than focusing the attention on real weal and woe.

### *Inflation of aspirations?*

Another theory implying that happiness is relative holds that we tend to get used to everything. The effects of improvement or deterioration of living conditions on happiness are hence short-lived. This theory was already advocated by the ancient Stoics. Currently, it is phrased in terms of “psycho-physical adaptation level” theory and cognitive “adjustment of aspirations” (Brickman and Campbell, 1971). As in the above case, several remarkable findings have been presented in support of this theory: the fact that lottery winners appear to be hardly happier than average; and the observation that quadriplegics tend to become reconciled to their fate (Brickman *et al.*, 1978, pp. 917-927).

Yet again it is obvious that humans cannot adjust to any situation. Like the “absolute thresholds” in psycho-physics there are “minimum levels” of need gratification. A few anomalies apart, nobody can adjust to “starvation”, “loneliness” and “injustice”.

**In summary**, there is sense in trying to improve human happiness. Better living conditions and wiser, more sensible living can contribute to more enjoyment in life. Though not all recipes work, many improvements are possible. The challenge for future research is not to question the obvious any longer, but to find out which improvements promise the greatest yields.

## **8. SHOULD HAPPINESS BE PROMOTED?**

If happiness levels can be raised, should they be raised? For the nineteenth-century Utilitarian social philosophers this question did not exist. Their moral axiom was that happiness is the greatest good and that we should promote it as much as possible (Greatest Happiness Principle). Yet there have always been philosophies that idealized suffering and questioned the desirability of life satisfaction.

For a long time such issues were largely a matter of conviction, value priorities being beyond discussion. However, as we get a better view of the reality consequences of various values, we become more aware of incompatibilities with other values we endorse. As a result, we are now better able to predict which mix of values promises the most results. Calculating ideological programs on the basis of empirically verified information about reality consequences is in its infancy. Bay’s (1965) study about the effect of and the preconditions for various sorts of “freedom” provides an encouraging example. Let us follow that lead and consider the consequences of promoting happiness. Will happiness contribute to other values such as “peace”, “wisdom” and “morality” or will undesirable effects prevail (egotism, apathy)?

### **8.1 Presumed consequences of happiness**

Traditionally, anti-hedonists have argued that enjoyment of life has adversative consequences and thereby destroys itself in the long run. Happiness is said to lead to “apathetic easy going” and “irresponsible optimism”, thus ringing in economical and

political decline. Happiness is also expected to give way to “individualism” and “egotism”, which weaken moral consciousness and disrupt social bonds. Another objection is that the social technology needed to bring about public happiness will bring us a “Brave New World”.

On the other hand, several traditions in modern psychology predict positive effects: humanist psychologists believe that happiness frees the way to “active involvement”, “creativity” and “better personal relations”. Current stress theory holds that positive attitudes such as happiness “buffer” the impact of negative life events. Similarly, an accepted view in psychosomatic theory is that chronic dissatisfaction increases vulnerability to disease and premature death!

## 8.2 Observed effects

As yet no empirical investigations have focused on consequences of happiness. Nevertheless, some indications can be found in the results of a few longitudinal investigations on life satisfaction and experimental studies on mood. These results suggest that a positive appreciation of life tends to broaden perception rather than paralyse it, to encourage active living rather than induce apathy and to foster social contact rather than lead to selfish individualism. There are strong indications that happiness fosters health and even lengthens lives somewhat (research reviewed in Veenhoven, 1988).

These findings do not conclude the whole discussion of whether happiness should be promoted or not; they simply do away with the argument that happiness is harmful.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

Centuries of thought about happiness have not been without effect: we are now closer to an answer to seven longstanding questions:

1. Major progress has been made in the conceptualization of happiness. We are now more aware of the varieties of well-being. This enables more precise observation and consideration of the variable under discussion: i.e. life satisfaction.
2. The invention of survey research has allowed the quantitative measurement of life satisfaction. Though not very precise, current interview techniques seem to measure happiness reasonably validly.
3. We are now able to answer the longstanding question of whether people are characteristically dissatisfied or not. Positive appreciation of life appears to be the rule.
4. In spite of great advances, we are largely in the dark about how people make up their mind about their life-as-a-whole. Various plausible theories have been proposed about the cognitive processes involved. The origins of affective experience are still mysterious, as we do not know much about the neural physiology of happiness either. The promising issue of “freezing” and “unfreezing” of attitudes towards life has hardly been explored at all.
5. In spite of a wealth of correlational research, we know very little about the conditions that foster a positive appreciation of life. What is lacking are follow up studies that can demonstrate causal effects and meta-analyses that show variations across time and

- culture. For the time being, it seems that people feel at their best when they live in a free, affluent and peaceful society, when they are part of an intimate network and are physically and mentally healthy.
6. Current evidence does not support the old idea that happiness levels cannot be raised permanently. Happiness is not a zero sum matter, nor a fixed trait, nor entirely relative. Planned promotion of the general public happiness is possible in principle.
  7. There is no evidence for the idea that happiness is harmful. Happiness does not numb or lead to apathy. Rather, it seems to activate people, to foster social contacts and to benefit health. Therefore, happiness is a matter worth promoting.

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## Notes

1. Still there are discrepancies that are worth studying. Current attempts to do so are hindered by inept indicators e.g. McKennel, 1978).

**SCHEME 2.1** *Classification of well-being concepts*

	Objective well-being	Subjective well-being	Mixed conceptions
individual well-being	personal qualities	self-appraisals	
— aspect	Wisdom, stability, hardiness, creativeness, morality, etc.	job satisfaction, self-esteem, control belief	ego strength, identity
— overall	need gratification, self-actualization, effectance	life satisfaction*, contentment, hedonic level.	(mental) health, adjustment, individual morale
Collective	Societal qualities	social (opinion) climate	
— aspect	coherence, justice, equal chances, stability, etc.	acceptance of political order, mutual trust, belief in national progress	social integration, anomy
— overall	viability, capacity	group morale	livability
Mixed conceptions			
— aspects	economic prosperity, safety, freedom, equality., etc.	emancipation	
— overall	welfare, progress	alienation	well-being in broadest sense

\*Focus of this article,

**SCHEME 2.2.** *Major questions about the inner processing of happiness*

	Substrates	
	Mental	Physical
Assessment of states	1 — emergence of pleasant affect? — comparison processes — striking the balance of life	3 — neuromechanics of pleasant experience — biochemical defects
Stabilization into traits	2 — how stable? — “freezing” and “unfreezing”: why, when, how?	4 — humans born for happiness? — temperamental differences? — biochemical imprinting?

## SCHEME 2.3

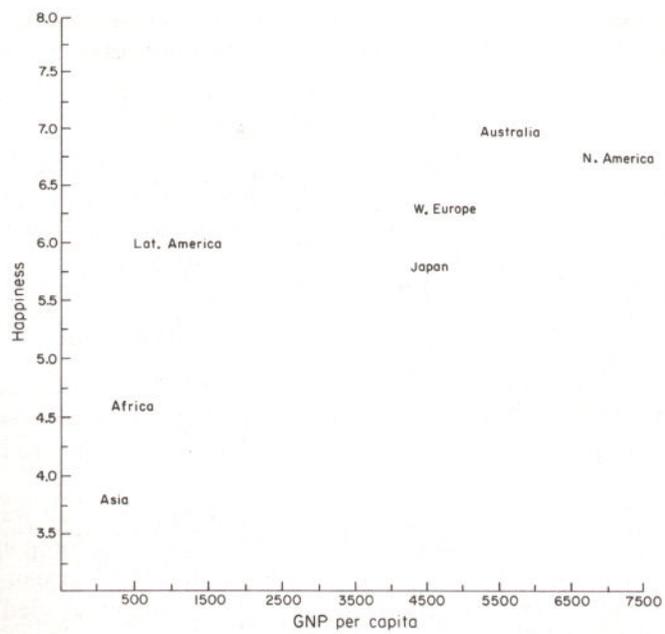


Fig. 2.1. Veenhoven (1984a:149): Happiness in seven parts of the world by GNP per head in 1975.