

# AVERAGE LEVEL OF SATISFACTION IN 10 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES EXPLANATION OF DIFFERENCES

Ruut Veenhoven

**Chapter 1 in: Saris, W.E., Veenhoven, R., Scherpenzeel, A.C. & Bunting B. (eds) 'A comparative study of satisfaction with life in Europe. Eötvös University Press, 1996, ISBN963 463 081 2, pp. 243-253**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Surveys in 10 European nations assessed satisfaction with life-as-a-whole and satisfaction with three life-domains (finances, housing, social contacts). Average satisfaction differs markedly across countries. Both satisfaction with life-as-a-whole and satisfaction with life-domains are highest in North-Western Europe, medium in Southern Europe and lowest in the East-European nations. Cultural measurement bias is unlikely to be involved. The country differences in average 'subjective' satisfaction of citizens correspond with 'objective' differences in societal quality.*

In chapter 13 we presented average satisfaction scores in the 10 nations (Scheme 1). These results indicate that West European countries have the highest mean satisfaction. The second in order, with respect to satisfaction, are the South European countries and at the bottom of the ordering the East and Central European countries can be found.

In chapter 14 analyses have been done to detect if other clusters can be found on the basis of the satisfaction scores when more efficient clustering procedures are used. The results were not very different. However, before we draw this conclusion we would like to look once more at alternative explanations for the findings in this chapter.

## **1 VALIDITY OF THE CROSS-COUNTRY DIFFERENCES IN AVERAGE SATISFACTION**

Comparing across borders is not without problems. One problem is the language; subtle differences in the connotation of words may produce a difference in response on seemingly identical items. Another problem is differential measurement error. For instance, social desirability bias may be stronger in one country than another. To what extent can such measurement artifacts be involved in the differences in satisfaction reported here?

### *Language bias?*

At first glance, the data in Scheme 1 of Chapter 13 suggest that satisfaction is highest in countries of Germanic tongue (Flanders, Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Sweden), and lowest in countries where Slavonic languages are spoken (Russia, Slovenia). The two

countries where Romanic languages are spoken (Italy, Spain) appear in the middle position. However, at a closer look we see that satisfaction is also high in Belgium-Wallonia, where a Romanic language is spoken (French). This is in line with earlier studies in Canada which have shown that French speaking Canadians do not score lower on satisfaction scales than English speaking Canadians (Blisshen and Atkinson, 1980). The low satisfaction in Hungary cannot be attributed to language either. The Hungarian language is close to Finnish, but the level of satisfaction in Finland is closer to the (high) level in Norway and Sweden, than to the level of satisfaction in Hungary (Veenhoven, 1992: 202).

It is thus unlikely that variation in language is responsible for all the differences in satisfaction observed here. Still, it is possible that some language-distortion is involved. If so, such effects will show in residual variation, when satisfaction is regressed on quality of life. In countries where the word 'satisfaction' is used rather easily, average satisfaction should appear more satisfied than predicted, on the basis of their living conditions. Whereas, in countries where the term denotes higher demands, average satisfaction will be below prediction. In this context it is worth taking a look at [Scheme 1](#), which presents a plot of life-satisfaction against income per head in the country. The residuals appear to be small; all cases are close to the regression line. That does not suggest a considerable influence for language. Moreover, the pattern of residuals does not show systematic differences in language-families. Three countries where Germanic languages are spoken appear above the regression line (Netherlands, Norway, Sweden), but one (Germany) appears to be less satisfied than its level of affluence would predict.

#### *Social desirability bias?*

All responses to questions on satisfaction are probably affected by desirability-bias; especially questions administered in a face-to-face interviews. If this bias is about equally strong everywhere, there is no problem for cross-national comparison. However, if the bias is stronger in one country than another, it can seriously distort the picture. This study did not involve items about the desirability of being satisfied or not, so we cannot check this possibility on our data. However, the European Value Study did involve such items. In an earlier analysis of that study, Veenhoven (1994: 139) found no higher life-satisfaction in nations where satisfaction is valued most ( $r=+.00$ ). Five nations involved in the European Value Study are involved in the present study as well: Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Spain. The European Value Study found satisfaction to be least desirable in Italy, and most desirable in Spain. Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands scored in between. If these differences in the moral desirability of being satisfied do distort reports of satisfaction, it is likely to be manifested in the residuals. Italians will then report less satisfaction than expected on the basis of quality of life in that country, and the Spanish will report more satisfaction. That pattern does not appear in the residuals of [Scheme 1](#) either. Though Italians are indeed slightly less happy than expected on the basis of their wealth, the Spanish are not more satisfied. The deviations of Germany and the Netherlands also do not fit the expected pattern.

*Plausibility of further measurement bias*

Obviously, more sources of differential measurement error can be involved. It is not easy to check all possible distortions. Yet we can obtain a global indication of the validity of the observed differences in life-satisfaction by comparing it with life-expectancy. Average life-expectancy also indicates how well people flourish in a country, but its measurement is not vulnerable to response bias. If responses to survey questions about satisfaction are heavily biased, we can expect little correlation with life-expectancy. Cases (countries) of great distortion will show up in eccentric positions in the scatter-plot.

**Scheme 2** presents the scatter-plot of average life satisfaction and average life-expectancy in the ten nations. The correlation is high:  $r=+.82$  ( $p<.01$ ). With one exception, all countries are close to the regression line. Only Spain stands out by greater length-of-life than satisfaction-with-life.

## 2 EXPLANATION OF THE CROSS-COUNTRY DIFFERENCES IN AVERAGE SATISFACTION

Chapter 1 mentioned three main explanations for differences in satisfaction between countries: 1) comparison-theory, 2) folklore-theory and 3) livability-theory<sup>1</sup>.

Comparison theory assumes that satisfaction is based on a mental calculus, in which perceptions of life-as-it-is are weighted against standards of how-life-should-be. Standards of comparison are presumed to be variable and to follow perceptions of possibilities. In this view, a high level of satisfaction in a country means that most citizens think of themselves as relatively well off. Because standards adjust, this theory implies that satisfaction is a temporary phenomenon. Because it is a perception of relative advantage, satisfaction is expected to bear little relationship with 'real' quality-of-life. This was discussed in Chapter 1, (the section about the possibilities of greater life satisfaction).

Folklore-theory holds that average satisfaction in a country is merely a reflection of the dominant outlook on life, which is part of the national character. A negative outlook would make citizens express dissatisfaction with everything, including their own life. A positive outlook would yield high satisfaction reports. France and Italy have been mentioned as countries where a cynical view prevails (Inglehart, 1990: 30). The USA is often mentioned as a culture of optimism (Ostroot and Snyder, 1985). In this view, satisfaction differences bear little relationship with quality-of-life in the country. Satisfaction is a matter of outlook, not of reality. See Chapter 1; the section regarding the possibility of greater life satisfaction).

---

<sup>1</sup> These theories and their implications are discussed in more detail in Veenhoven, 1995.

Livability-theory assumes that satisfaction-with-life depends on quality-of-life; the better the living-conditions in a country, the more satisfied its inhabitants will be. 'Good' living-conditions are presumed to be conditions that fit human nature well. Livability-theory is closely connected to the idea that there are universal human needs. It sees human societies as collective arrangements for need-gratification, and assumes that societies can be more or less effective in this respect. Gratification of needs is seen to result in positive affect, frustration in negative affective experience. In its turn, affective tone would determine appraisals of satisfaction (I feel good so I must be satisfied). (See Chapter 1; the section concerning the determinants of life satisfaction).

Comparison-theory and folklore-theory imply that 'subjective' satisfaction in nations will bear little relationship with 'objective' quality-of-life. On the other hand, livability-theory predicts a close relationship with it. This cross-national study allows an empirical test of these implications.

### 3 SATISFACTION WITH LIFE DOMAINS AND QUALITY OF LIVING CONDITIONS

This study assessed satisfaction with three life-domains: satisfaction with one's financial situation, satisfaction with housing and satisfaction with social contacts. From other sources we have indications of the actual quality which nations provide in the first two domains; income per head in the country and number of persons per dwelling. Unfortunately, we have no comparable data on density and quality of social contacts.

In **Scheme 3** these estimates of 'real' income per capita are plotted against average satisfaction with finances. A clear relationship appears: satisfaction with finances is lower in the poorer nations and higher in the richer ones;  $r=+.92$  ( $p<.001$ ).

Next to level of income in the country, we also considered inequality in income. High income inequality means typically that a few earn more than most. Consequently, comparison-theory predicts lower income-satisfaction in nations where income-differences are most pronounced. Data on income-inequality in nations were drawn from the Human development Report (UNPD 1990). **Scheme 4** shows this prediction is not supported by the data:  $r=-.10$  (ns).

The quality of housing in nations can be estimated by the number of persons per dwelling. Data on that matter were found in *The Economist* (1990:240). In **Scheme 5** the average number per country is plotted against average satisfaction with housing. Now a clear relationship appears; the more persons per dwelling, the less satisfaction with housing is found in the countries. Hungary is an outlier in this pattern. In spite of relatively low number of persons per dwelling, Hungarians are least satisfied with housing.

As there are no comparable data regarding social contacts in the nations examined here, we cannot check whether the observed differences in subjective satisfaction with social contacts correspond with objective differences in quality of contacts.

#### 4 SATISFACTION WITH LIFE AND QUALITY OF SOCIETY

In Chapter 1 we have reviewed studies that showed higher satisfaction with life as a whole in nations that provide better quality of life. Table 5 showed sizable correlations with 'material comfort', 'social equality', 'political freedom' and 'access to knowledge'. The present study found similar relations between life satisfaction and nation characteristics. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, average life satisfaction is closely linked to income per head (Scheme 1). The correlation is +.93. We also considered the relationship between life satisfaction and income- inequality. In this case no correlation exists ( $r = -.05$  ns). Remember that financial satisfaction was not related to income-inequality either (Scheme 3). Apparently, level of income matters more than income differences in the country. The importance of material comfort is also reflected in a sizable correlation with quality of housing. The more persons per household in a country, the lower the average life satisfaction ( $r = -.60$ ). In fact, persons per dwelling correlates equally strong with life satisfaction as with housing satisfaction (Scheme 5). Lastly, we also explored the relationship of average life satisfaction with 'human rights' in the country. Data on that latter matter were found with Gupta et. al. (1994). A positive relationship appears. The more human rights are respected in a country, the higher average life satisfaction ( $r = +.85$ ).

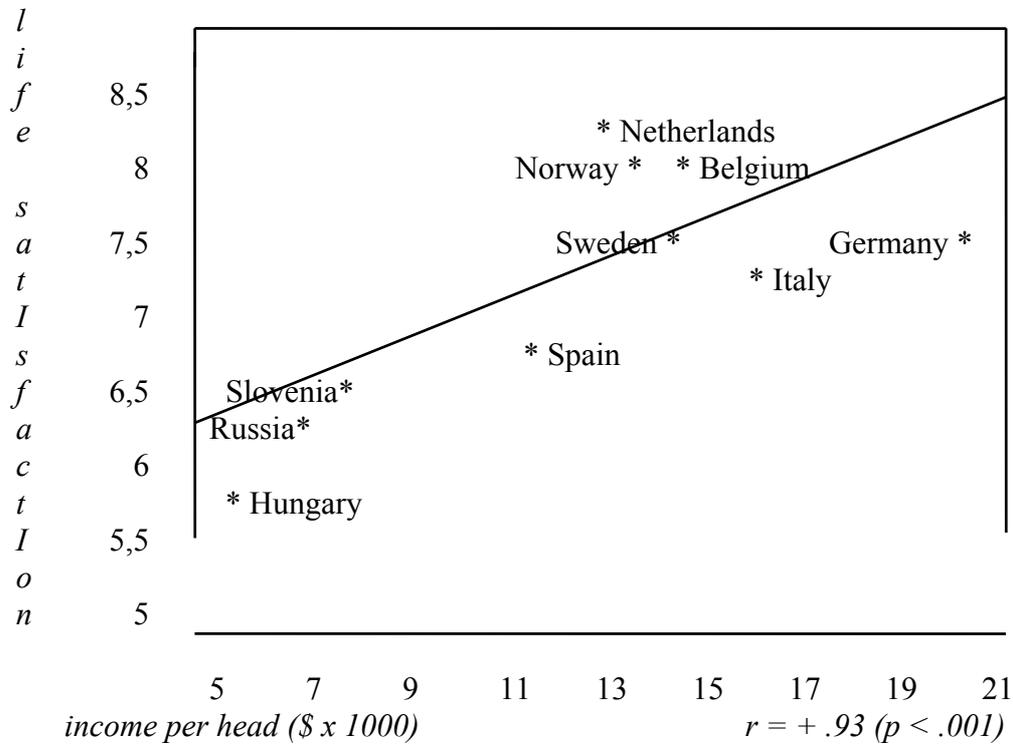
The above discussed relation between average life satisfaction and quality of society are summarized in Scheme 6. The results were largely in line with livability theory. The better the living conditions in a country, the more satisfied people are with the concerned living domains and with life as a whole. The only exception is income-inequality. Apparently this matter is of minor importance: at least in the fairly equal countries studied here. More detailed analysis on a broader dataset are reported in Veenhoven (1995).

#### 5 CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that the very strong relationship between living conditions and satisfaction levels across countries cannot be discounted as method artifacts. On the other hand, we have given more evidence for the relationship between living conditions and satisfaction levels across countries. Together, these findings leave no doubt that satisfaction is firmly linked to 'objective' quality of life. As such these observations confirm livability-theory. The data do not meet the above mentioned implications predicted from comparison-theory and folklore-theory.

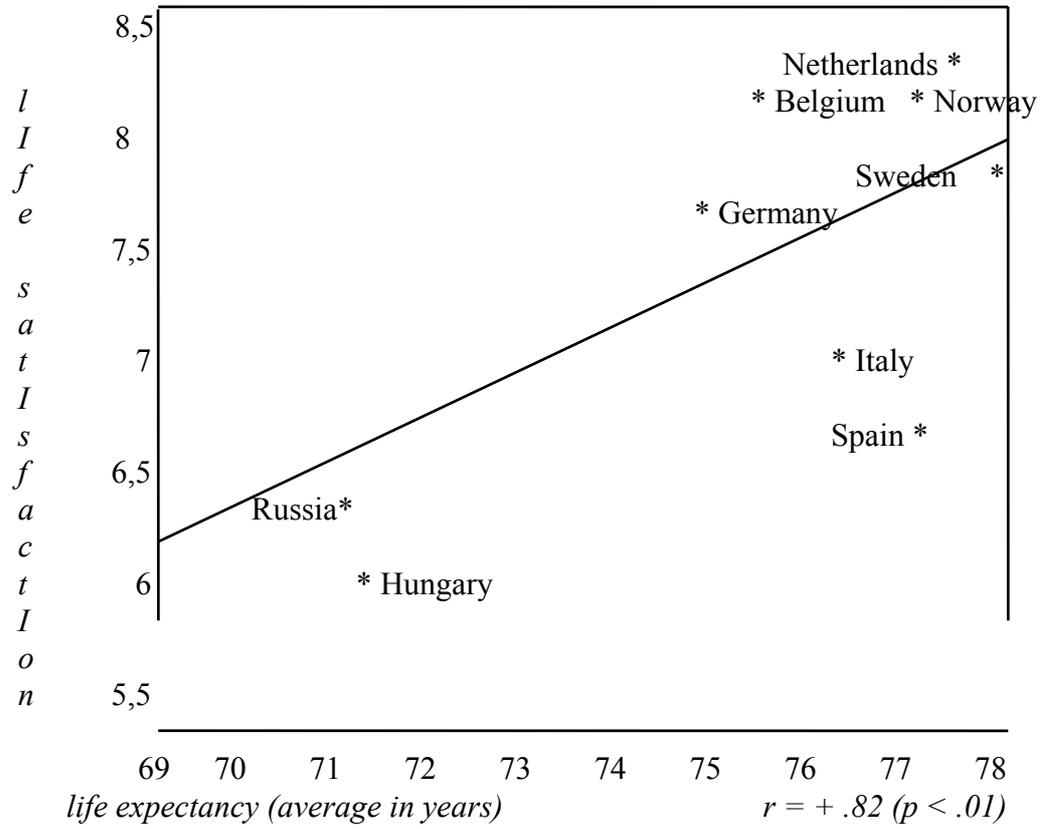
Scheme 1.

**Plot of average life satisfaction by income per head in nations.**



Data: income per head: UNPD 1994

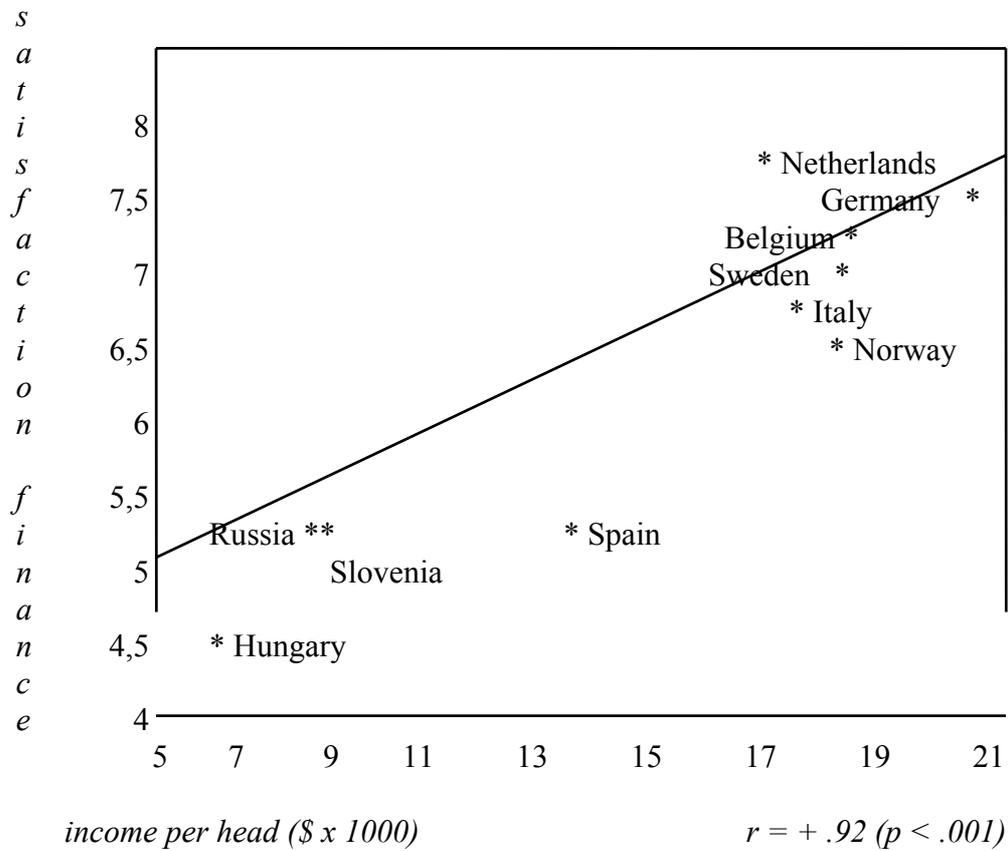
Scheme 2.

**Plot of average life satisfaction by life expectancy in nations.**

Data life expectancy: UNDP 1994

Scheme 3.

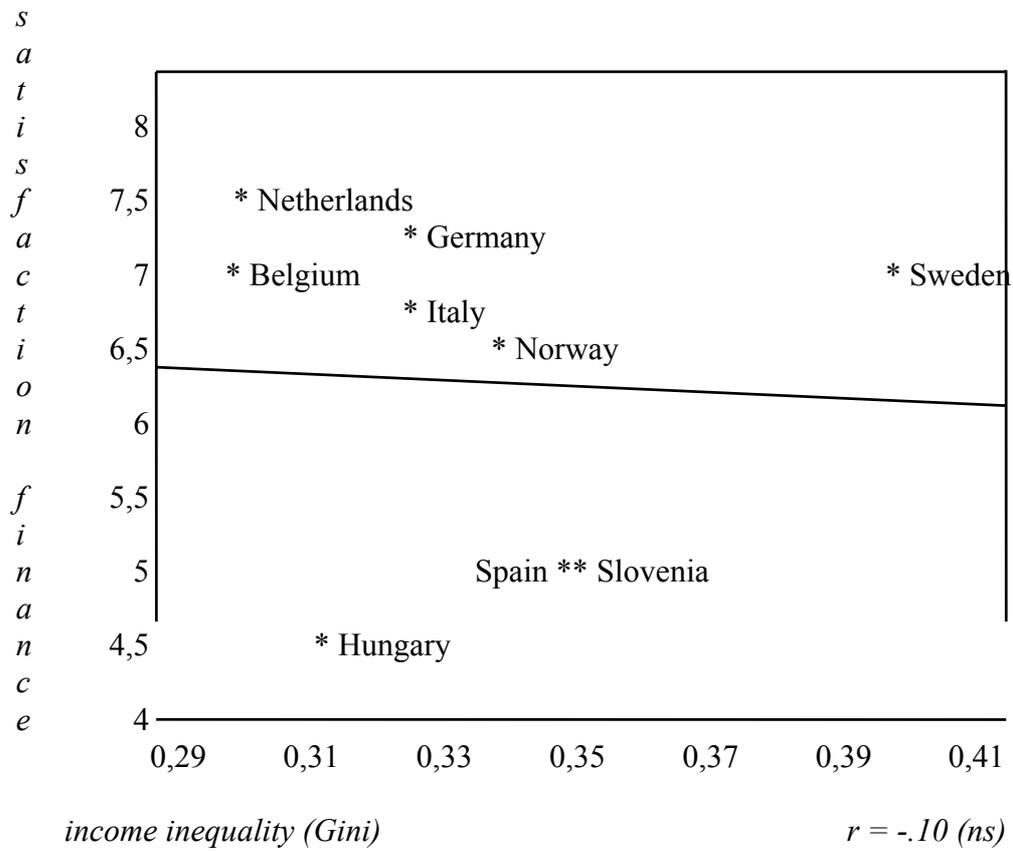
**Plot of average income-satisfaction by income-level in nations.**



Data income per head: UNDP 1994

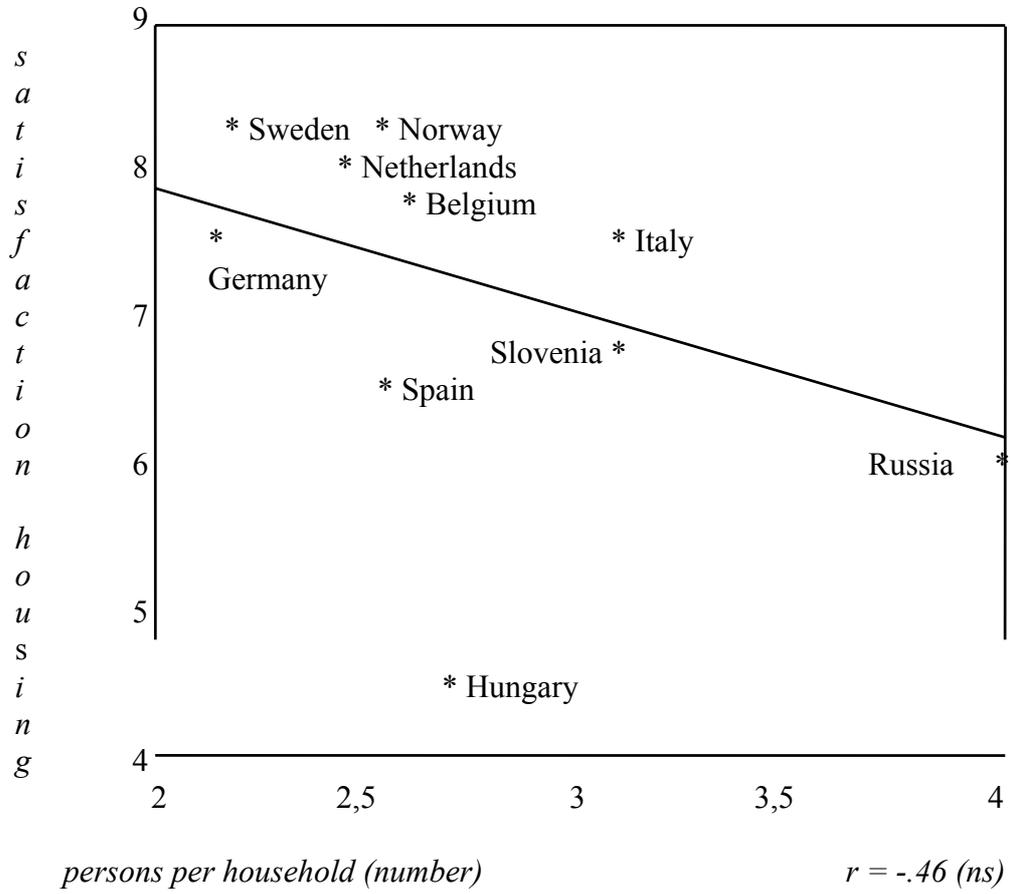
Scheme 4.

Plot of average income-satisfaction by income-inequality in nations.



Scheme 5.

**Plot of average housing-satisfaction by housing condition in nations.**



Scheme 6.

**Quality of society and average satisfaction in 10 European countries.**

Indicators of quality of society	satisfaction with finance	satisfaction with housing	satisfaction with contact	satisfaction with life
income per head	.92	.87	.59	.93
income-inequality	-.10	.27	-.00	-.05
persons per dwelling	-.51	-.47	.07	-.60
human rights	.50	.29	.05	.58

**REFERENCES**

Blishen, B. and T. Atkinson (1980).  
*Anglophone and Francophone differences in perceptions of quality of life in Canada.*  
In: Szalai, A. and F. Andrews (Eds.) *The Quality of Life*, London: Sage, 25-39.

The Economist (1990).  
*Book of vital world statistics.*  
London: Random house.

Gupta, D. K., A. J. Jongman and A. P. Schmid (1994).  
*Creating a composite index for assessing country-performance in the field of human rights.*  
*Human Rights Quarterly*, 16, 131-162.

Inglehart, R. (1990).  
*Culture shift in advanced industrial society.*  
New York: Princeton University Press.

Ostroot, N. and W. Snyder (1985).  
*Measuring cultural bias in a cross-national study.*  
*Social indicators Research*, 17, 243-251.

UNPD (1990).  
*Human Development Report 1990.*  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UNPD (1994)

*Human Development Report 1994.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Veenhoven, R. (1993b)

*Happiness in Nations.*

RISBO, Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Veenhoven, R. (1994a).

*Is happiness a trait? Tests of the theory that a better society does not make people any happier.*

Social Indicators Research, 32, 101-160.

Veenhoven, R. (1995b).

*The cross-national pattern of happiness: Test of predictions implied in three theories of happiness.*

Social Indicators Research, 34, 33-68.