

WHAT WE KNOW

Ruut Veenhoven

The World Book of Happiness

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After more than 30 years of studying worldwide happiness, Ruut Veenhoven is often called 'The Happiness Professor'. He founded the World Database of Happiness, offering the world an updated insight into thousands of studies, surveys and correlational findings on happiness. Answering five questions, he finally summarizes what we know about happiness.

Happiness is a main goal in modern society. Most individuals seek to live a happy life and see much value in happiness. At the same time, support for the moral standpoint that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number of people is growing. Consequently, happiness is also moving up on the political agenda.

This pursuit of happiness calls for an understanding of conditions for happiness and this in turn requires a systematic study of the subject. The study of happiness has long been a playground for philosophical speculation and this has not resulted in a solid evidence base. During the last decades, survey-research methods introduced by the social sciences have brought a break-through. Dependable measures of happiness have developed, by means of which a significant body of knowledge has evolved. This literature on happiness can be framed within five key-questions that can be ordered as steps in the process for creating greater happiness for a greater number.

1 WHAT IS 'HAPPINESS' ?

The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'well-being' or 'quality of life', and denotes both individual and social welfare. The word is also used in the more specific meaning of 'a subjective appreciation of life' and it is on this meaning that this chapter will concentrate. Happiness is defined as *the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favourably*. In other words : how much one likes the life one leads.

Ruut Veenhoven is emeritus-professor of 'social conditions for human happiness' at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (The Netherlands). He studied sociology and is also accredited in social psychology and social-sexuology. He is often called 'The Happiness Professor' and is respected worldwide for his lifelong research on the subjective quality of life. His major publications are : 'Conditions of Happiness', 'Happiness in Nations' and 'Happy Life-expectancy'. Ruut Veenhoven is founder and director of the World Database of Happiness and editor of the Journal of Happiness Studies.

2 CAN HAPPINESS BE MEASURED ?

Since happiness is defined as something we have in mind, it can be measured using questions. A common question is :

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6 / 7 / 8 / 9 / 10

extremely dissatisfied ←————→ extremely satisfied

Though currently used, these questions are much criticized. Three main objections have been raised : it is doubted that responses to such simple questions reflect a true appreciation of life ; there are doubts about the comparability of such ratings across cultures ; and it is claimed that subjective appraisals of life are meaningless. These qualms have been discussed elsewhere and rejected by serious studies of Diener, Saris and others. The doubt about the comparability of responses to such questions across cultures has also been disproved in earlier studies of mine.

3 HOW HAPPY ARE WE ?

Look at an example. In [scheme 1](#) is the response to this question in Germany. The most frequently chosen options are 7, 8 and 9 and only 14% score below 5. The average is 7.2. This result implies that most Germans must feel happy most of the time. We can compare this with the results of other countries and construct a global ranking.

4 WHAT CAUSES US TO BE MORE OR LESS HAPPY ?

Having established that people differ in happiness, the next question is why. Various factors are involved : collective action and individual behaviour, simple sensory experiences and higher cognition, stable characteristics of the individual and his environment, as well as freaks of fate. [Scheme 2](#) presents a tentative ordering of factors and processes in a sequence model.

The model presumes that the judgment of life draws on the flow-of-life experiences, particularly on positive and negative experience. The flow of experiences is a mental reaction to the course-of-life events. This includes major one-time events, such as marriage or migrations, as well as repetitious mundane events, like getting up in the morning and doing the dishes. The events that happen in life are partly a matter of good or bad luck, such as in the case of accidents. The occurrences of life-events also depend on given conditions and capacities. Traffic accidents are less frequent in well-organized societies and among attentive persons. Thus, the chances of ‘rewarding’ and ‘aversive’ events are not the same for everybody. This is commonly referred to as life-chances. Present life-chances root in past events and chance-structures, in societal history as well as individual development.

An example may serve to illustrate this four-step model : A person’s life-chances may be poor because he/she lives in a lawless society, is in a powerless position within

that society, and is personally neither smart nor nice (Step 1). That person will run into many adverse events. He/she will be robbed, duped, humiliated and excluded (Step 2). Consequently, that person will frequently feel anxious, angry and lonely (Step 3). Based on this flow of experience it is reasonable to assume that the person will judge their life-as-a-whole negatively (Step 4).

Quality of society

Why does happiness differ so much across nations ? **Scheme 3** presents some of the societal qualities which underlie these differences. Many of these factors are part of the 'modernity' syndrome. The more modern the country, the happier its citizens are. This finding will be a surprise to the prophets of doom, who associate modernity with anomie and alienation. Though modernisation may indeed involve problems of this kind, its benefits are clearly greater. The following characteristics of society correlate positively with happiness (in declining order) : affluence, economic freedom, urbanisation, schooling, political freedom, civil rights, tolerance of minorities, personal freedom, pluriformity (% of migrants).The highest negative correlation is corruption, followed at some distance by gender inequality and income inequality.

Social position

Numerous studies all over the world have considered differences in individual happiness within countries. Because most of these studies are inspired by egalitarian social policy, the emphasis is often on social differences, such as differences in income, education and employment. Contrary to expectation, these positional differences bear little relationship to happiness, at least not in a modern affluent society. Together, the positional variables explain no more than 10% of the variance in happiness. The main findings are summarized in **Scheme 4**.

There is a worldwide positive correlation between happiness and occupational prestige, participation in associations, having a spouse and having friends.

Life ability

The strongest correlations are observed at the psychological level ; happy people are typically better endowed intellectually than the unhappy. The common variance explained by such variables tends to be around 30%. Some of the main findings are summarized in **Scheme 5**. Many of the findings on individual variations in happiness boil down to a difference in ability to control one's environment. This pattern seems to be universal. There is a worldwide positive correlation between happiness and mental health, sociability, physical health, internal control, extraversion and lust acceptance.

5 IS GREATER HAPPINESS POSSIBLE ?

Much of the research on happiness is prompted by the hope of finding ways to create greater happiness for a greater number of people. However, there are several theories about happiness, which imply that the improvement of living conditions will not reduce discontent. One such theory is that happiness is relative. Another is the theory that happiness is a trait. Both theories have been tested and have been rejected by our research. Another comforting finding is that average happiness can be as high as 8 on a 0-10 scale. If this is possible in these surveyed countries, it should also be possible in other nations.

6 THE WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

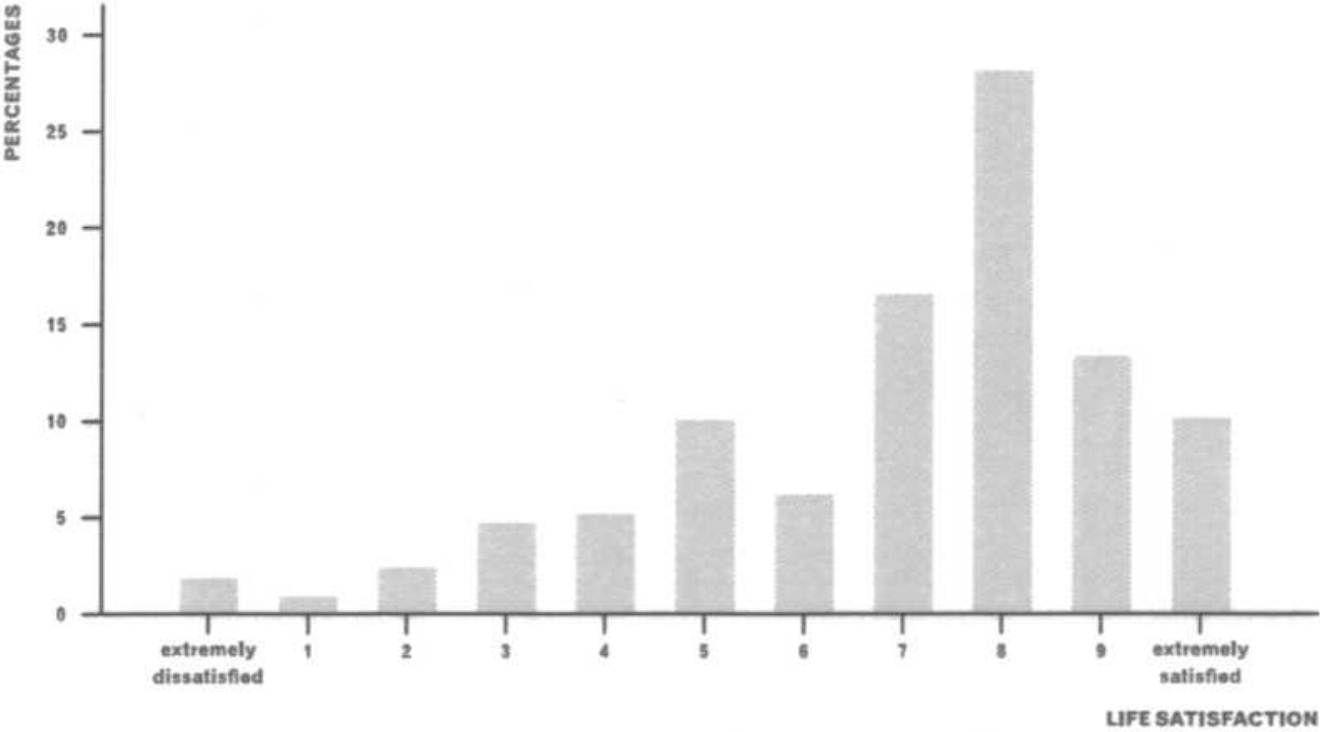
Greater happiness for a greater number of people requires better knowledge of the conditions necessary for happiness. Better knowledge in turn requires not only more research, but also better synthesis of the available research findings. Research synthesis requires that the available findings are gathered, selected and described in a uniform way. This preliminary work is time consuming and ill-funded, and given the present scale of the task is impossible for a single researcher to complete in a lifetime. As a result, we risk losing sight of the lessons which this data can teach.

The World Database of Happiness is a tool for dealing with the growing stream of research findings on happiness ; both distributional findings (how happy people are) and correlational findings (concomitants of happiness). In its focus on 'findings' the system differs from data-archives that store 'investigations' and from bibliographies that store 'publications'. As yet, there is no established word for this tool for research synthesis. We call it a 'finding catalogue'.

The substantive focus of this database is on subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole. The database contains five related collections on this matter : 1) The 'bibliography of happiness', which lists some 4,000 publications ; 2) a collection of acceptable 'measures of happiness', which contains about 800 variants ; 3) the collection of 'happiness in nations' which lists the distributional findings of some 3,000 general population surveys at national level ; 4) the collection of 'happiness in groupings', containing the results of some 3,000 studies among particular categories within nations ; and 5) the collection of 'correlational findings', which cross-references some 11,000 findings on covariates of happiness.

These collections can be browsed on the internet at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

Scheme 1: Happiness in Germany – Source: European Social Survey 2006



Scheme 2: Evaluation of life: a sequence model of conditions and processes

LIFE-CHANCES →	COURSE OF EVENTS →	FLOW OF EXPERIENCE →	EVALUATION OF LIFE
<p>Quality of society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic welfare • Social equality • Political freedom • Cultural lush • Moral order • Etc. <p>Social position</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material property • Political influence • Social prestige • Family bonds • Etc. <p>Individual abilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical fitness • Psychic fortitude • Social capability • Intellectual skill • Etc. 	<p>Confrontation with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deficit or affluence • Attack or protection • Solitude or company • Humiliation or honour • Routine or challenge • Ugliness or beauty • Etc. 	<p>Experiences of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yearning or satiation • Anxiety or safety • Loneliness or love • Rejection or respect • Dullness or excitement • Repulsion or rapture • Etc... 	<p>Appraisal of average affect</p> <p>Comparison with standards of the good life</p> <p>Striking an overall balance of life</p>
Conditions for happiness		Appraisal process	

Scheme 3: Happiness and society in 146 nations, circa 2006

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIETY	CORRELATION WITH HAPPINESS
Affluence	+ .69
Rule of law	
• Civil rights	+ .50
• Corruption	- .69
Freedom	
• Economical	+ .63
• Political	+ .53
• Personal	+ .41
Equality	
• Income inequality	- .08
• Gender inequality	- .21
Pluriformity	
• % Migrants	+ .29
• Tolerance of minorities	+ .49
Modernity	
• Schooling	+ .56
• Urbanisation	+ .58

How do you read this scheme?

The maximum is always

+ 1.00 or - 1.00.

The higher the positive number,
the higher the positive relationship.

The lower the negative number,
the lower the negative relationship.

Source: World Database of
Happiness (Veenhoven 2010); (p. 338)

Scheme 4: Happiness and position in society: summary of research findings

	CORRELATION <i>within</i> western nations	SIMILARITY OF CORRELATION <i>across</i> all nations
Social rank		
• Income	+	-
• Education	±	-
• Occupational prestige	+	+
Social participation		
• Employment	±	+
• Participation in associations	+	+
Primary network		
• Spouse	++	+
• Children	0	?
• Friends	+	+
	++ Strongly positive + Positive 0 No relationship - Negative ? Not yet investigated	+ Similar correlations ± Varying - Different correlations ? No data

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of correlational findings (Veenhoven 2009); (p. 338)

Scheme 5: Happiness and life abilities: summary of research findings

	CORRELATION <i>within</i> western nations	SIMILARITY OF CORRELATION <i>across</i> all nations
Proficiencies		
• Physical health	+	+
• Mental health	++	+
• IQ	0	+
Personality		
• Internal control	+	+
• Extraversion	+	+
• Conscientiousness	+	?
Art of living		
• Lust acceptance	+	+
• Sociability	++	+
	++ Strongly positive + Positive 0 No relationship - Negative ? Not yet investigated	+ Similar correlations ± Varying - Different correlations ? No data

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of correlational findings (Veenhoven 2009); (p. 338)

Average happiness in 148 nations 2000-2009

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of correlational findings (Veenhoven 2009).

Afghanistan	4.1	Czech Republic	6.5	Kenya	3.4	Qatar	6.8
Albania	4.6	Denmark	8.3	Kosovo	5.4	Romania	5.7
Algeria	5.4	Djibouti	5.7	Kuwait	6.6	Russia	5.6
Andorra	6.8	Dominican Republic	7.6	Kyrgyzstan	5.5	Rwanda	4.3
Angola	4.3	Ecuador	6.4	Laos	6.2	Saudi Arabia	6.5
Argentina	7.3	Egypt	5.7	Latvia	5.3	Senegal	4.5
Armenia	5.0	El Salvador	6.7	Lebanon	4.7	Serbia	5.6
Australia	7.7	Estonia	5.9	Liberia	4.3	Sierra Leone	3.6
Austria	7.7	Ethiopia	4.2	Lithuania	5.5	Singapore	6.7
Azerbaijan	5.3	Finland	7.9	Luxembourg	7.7	Slovakia	5.8
Bangladesh	5.3	France	6.6	Macedonia	4.7	Slovenia	6.9
Belarus	5.7	Georgia	4.3	Madagascar	3.7	South Africa	6.0
Belgium	7.3	Germany	7.1	Malawi	4.8	South Korea	6.1
Belize	6.6	Ghana	5.2	Malaysia	6.6	Spain	7.3
Benin	3.0	Greece	6.3	Mali	4.7	Sri Lanka	5.1
Bolivia	6.5	Guatemala	7.2	Malta	7.1	Sudan	5.0
Bosnia	5.8	Guinea	4.5	Mauritania	5.0	Sweden	7.8
Botswana	4.7	Guyana	6.5	Mexico	7.9	Switzerland	8.0
Brazil	7.5	Haiti	3.9	Moldova	4.9	Syria	5.9
Bulgaria	4.4	Honduras	7.0	Mongolia	5.7	Taiwan	6.2
Burkina Faso	4.4	Hong Kong	6.0	Montenegro	5.2	Tajikistan	5.1
Burundi	2.9	Hungary	5.5	Morocco	5.3	Tanzania	2.6
Cambodia	4.9	Iceland	8.2	Mozambique	3.8	Thailand	6.6
Cameroon	3.9	India	5.5	Namibia	5.2	Togo	2.6
Canada	8.0	Indonesia	6.1	Nepal	5.3	Trinidad-Tabago	7.0
Central African Republic	4.6	Iran	5.8	Netherlands	7.6	Tunisia	5.9
Chad	5.4	Iraq	4.7	New Zealand	7.5	Turkey	5.8
Chile	6.6	Ireland	7.6	Nicaragua	7.1	Uganda	4.5
China	6.4	Israel	6.9	Niger	3.8	Ukraine	5.0
Colombia	7.7	Italy	6.7	Nigeria	5.7	United Arab Emirates	7.3
Congo-Brazzaville	3.7	Ivory Coast	4.5	Norway	7.9	United Kingdom (Britain)	7.2
Congo (Kinshasa)	4.4	Jamaica	6.7	Pakistan	5.4	United States of America (USA)	7.4
Costa Rica	8.5	Japan	6.2	Palestina	5.0	Uruguay	6.8
Croatia	6.0	Jordan	6.2	Panama	7.8	Uzbekistan	6.0
Cyprus	7.0	Kazakhstan	6.1	Paraguay	6.9	Venezuela	7.2
				Peru	6.3	Vietnam	6.1
				Philippines	5.5	Yemen	4.8
				Poland	6.3	Zambia	5.0
				Portugal	5.7	Zimbabwe	2.8