

CAN WE GET HAPPIER THAN WE ARE?

Ruut Veenhoven

I. Brdar (ed.). The Human Pursuit of Well-Being: A Cultural Approach, ISBN: 978-94-0071374-1. © Springer Science, 2011, New York, pp. 3-38.

1 INTRODUCTION

What is the final goal of public policy? Jeremy Bentham (1789/1970) would say: *greater happiness for a greater number*. He thought of happiness as subjective enjoyment of life; in his words, it is "the sum of pleasures and pains." In his time, the happiness could not be measured. It was, therefore, difficult to assess how happiness could be furthered and to determine whether attempts to do so were successful or not. Hence, happiness remained a subject of philosophical speculation.

Today, we can do better. Social scientists have found that happiness can be measured using questions about life-satisfaction, and they have gone on to apply such questions in large-scale surveys of general population worldwide. In this paper I take stock of their findings.

2 HOW HAPPY ARE WE?

Most inhabitants of modern society are happy. This is seen from their responses to the question: "*All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?*" Please indicate using a number from 0 to 10, where 0 is "extremely dissatisfied" and 10 "extremely satisfied." The responses to this question in Germany are depicted in [Fig. 1.1](#). More than 50% of the Germans rate their life at seven or higher and fewer than 15% of Germans rate their lives at five or below five. Studies that use slightly different questions have yielded similar results. The average "school mark" that Germans give for their quality of life is currently 7.2 ¹.

Rank of Happiness in Nations

How does German happiness rank in comparison to other nations? Some illustrative findings are presented in [Table 1.1](#), and although Germany falls in the middle of this list, it is actually in the top range for the world. As one can see, average happiness varies between 8.2 (Denmark) and 3.3 (Zimbabwe), and with 7.2, Germany ranks high in the five-point interval between the highest and lowest average happiness.

Trend of Happiness in Nations

Survey research on happiness started in the late 1940s and took off in the early 1970s. Until recently, it was difficult to discern a pattern in the data; changes over time tend to be small and our view of the trend is often blurred by minor variations in sampling and questioning. Now that we have more and better data, a pattern of rising happiness has begun to emerge (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). Some illustrative cases are presented in [Fig. 1.2](#).

3 GREATER HAPPINESS POSSIBLE?

Can public policy create greater happiness? Several scientists think not. Some psychologists maintain that happiness is largely inborn or at least embedded in stable personality. Hence, a better society will not yield happier citizens. This view is known as the "set point" theory (Lykken, 1999). Some sociologists draw the same conclusion, because they think happiness depends on social comparison and that one is not better off than the neighbors if conditions for everybody improve. In this vein, the case of the USA is often mentioned as an example: material wealth would have doubled there since the 1950s, while average happiness seems to have remained at the same level (Easterlin, 1995). These scientists are wrong, both empirically and theoretically.

Empirical Indications

There is a clear relation between average happiness and societal quality. Think of the case of Zimbabwe in [Fig. 1.1](#), where this country is at the bottom with an average of 3.3. Apparently, people cannot live happily in a failed state, even if their neighbors suffer in a similar way. The correlations in [Table 1.2](#) show that this is no exception; differences in quality of society explain about 80% of the variation in average happiness in the present day world.

Average happiness *has* changed in most nations and typically for the better (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). [Figure 1.2](#) depicts a gradual rise of happiness in Denmark over the last 30 years and a dramatic fall in average happiness in Russia, following the Ruble Crisis of 1995. Clearly, happiness is not fixed to a set point!

[Figure 1.2](#) also shows that greater happiness is possible in most nations of the world. Average happiness is currently highest in Denmark, with an average of 8.2. What is possible in Denmark should also be possible in other countries. We cannot object that Danish happiness is a matter of genetic endowment or national character, because [Fig. 1.2](#) shows that happiness has improved in Denmark since 1973.

Present-day happiness in Denmark may be close to the maximally possible level. If so, there is still a long way to go for most nations of this world, since the world's average happiness is now about 5.5. If we ever reached the maximum of average happiness, there is still the possibility to extend the duration of our happiness and create more happy life years for a greater number (Veenhoven, 2005).

Theoretical Underpinning

The erroneous idea that greater happiness is not possible has its roots in erroneous theories about the nature of happiness. One of these mistaken theories is that happiness is merely a matter of outlook on life and that this outlook is set in fixed dispositions, which are part of an individual's personality as well as of their national character. Another faulty theory is that happiness results from cognitive comparison, in particular from social comparison. Elsewhere, I have shown that these theories are wrong (Veenhoven, 1991, 1995).

My alternative theory of happiness holds that we appraise life on the basis of affective information in the first place. We experience positive as well as negative affects, and in appraising how much we like the life we live, we assess to what extent the former outbalances the latter. This theory fits Bentham's concept of happiness as "the sum of pleasures and pains." In my view, positive and negative affects signal the gratification of basic human needs, so in the end, happiness is determined by need gratification. Elsewhere, I have discussed this theory in more detail (Veenhoven, 2009).

4 HOW CAN HAPPINESS BE RAISED?

Apparently, greater happiness for a greater number is possible. How can this be achieved? I see possibilities at three levels: (1) at the macro-level of society, (2) at the meso-level of organizations, (3) at the micro-level of individual citizens.

4.1 Macro-level: Improving the livability of society

Happiness also depends on the quality of the wider society. As we have seen in [Table 1.1](#), there are wide differences in happiness across nations, and these differences are clearly linked to societal qualities, some of which are presented in [Table 1.2](#).

Will further economic growth make us happier? [Table 1.2](#) suggests so, because happiness is strongly correlated with the wealth of the nation. Yet, material affluence appears to be subject to the law of diminishing return, and economic growth yields more happiness in poor nations than in rich nations. This is not to say that economic development does not add to happiness at all in rich nations. Happiness is still on the rise in affluent nations, and it is well possible that this rise is linked to economic growth, directly or indirectly. We simply do not know what the underlying links are, as yet.

Still another reason to keep the economy going is that the "playing" may be as important as the prizes. Happiness is not only found in consumption, it is also found in productive activity. Like most animals, we have an innate need to use our potentials. The biological function of this need is to keep us sharp, in the human case, in particular, to keep the brain in shape. The human species evolved under the conditions of a hunter-gatherer existence that involved a lot of challenge. In today's conditions, as an industrial society, we still need some challenges and most of us find them mainly in our work life. In this perspective, we better not follow Layard's (2005) advice to discourage economic competition, though there is a point in keeping the competition nice and leaving room for other arenas in society.

The data in [Table 1.2](#) do not suggest that a reduction of income differences will add to happiness; the zero-order correlation is close to zero, and when the wealth of the nation is taken into account, we even see a positive effect of income inequality. Though income inequality may be unfair, we can apparently live with it. Likewise, the data do not suggest that happiness can be advanced by increasing the offerings of a welfare state. At first sight, (here is some correlation between expenditures for social security and happiness in nations, but the statistical relationship disappears when we take into account that big spending nations tend to be richer. For instance, happiness is fairly high in Sweden, and Sweden is known for its extended welfare state; yet, it is equally high in Iceland, which scores equally high and spends much less on social security (Veenhoven, 2000; Ouweneel, 2002).

The greatest gains seem to be possible in the realms of freedom and justice. Good governance also appears to contribute much to average happiness in nations, irrespective of the political color of the parties in the saddle.

4.2 Meso-level: Improving the livability of institutions

Another source of happiness is the institutional settings in which we spend most of our time, such as at work or at school. Systematic improvements in those realms will probably add to the average happiness of a nation.

This requires that we know which settings produce the most happiness, for example, determine the kind of schools where pupils enjoy their school years the most. Curiously, little investigation has been done in this field as yet, not even for old age homes. The prime product of such a research would be the number of happy life years.

There is a lot of talk about quality of life in institutions, but little research. This is probably because there is little incentive to bother about the happiness of pupils and residents of care homes.

Governments can create an incentive by investigating the happiness output of institutions. Once differences are visible, the market will do its work. For instance, most parents will prefer a school where most children are happy over a school where the majority is not, even if the latter school produces higher grades.

4.3 Micro-level: Helping individuals to live happier

Happiness can be furthered at the individual level in three ways by: (1) training art-of-living skills, (2) informing people about the probable outcomes of choices, and (3) improving professional guidance in self-development and life choice. Below, I will expand on these options, since they are particularly relevant for positive psychology.

4.3.1 Training Art-of-living skills

Many people think that they would be happier if they had more money or a higher position on the social ladder. However, research shows that these things do not matter very much, at least not in affluent and egalitarian societies. Differences in income and social status explain only some 5% of the differences in Fig. 1.1. Current images about condition for happiness are misleading.

What then does matter for happiness? About 10% of the differences can be attributed to social relations, in particular to a good marriage. Another 10% is due to good or bad luck, probably more so in countries where life is less predictable. Most of the difference appears to be due to personal characteristics: about 30% can be attributed to variation in life ability (Headey & Wearing, 1992). The relative importance of inner strengths should not be surprising if we realize that living conditions are typically very good in modern nations: the better the external conditions, the less they account for differences in happiness. In Paradise, all the difference in happiness will be due to inner competence, neurotics will quarrel with Angels. In Hell, the differences in happiness (if any) will largely be determined by closeness to the fire, because nobody can stand that environment. So the most evident way to advance happiness in modern society is to strengthen life abilities.

Part of these abilities is genetically determined or little alterable for other reasons. Still, there are also capabilities that can be improved through therapy and training. Psychotherapy is now well established in modern nations but still underutilized. There is also an emerging field of training in art of living in line with the new "positive psychology." "Art of living" is the knack of leading a satisfying life, and in particular, the ability to develop a rewarding life style (Veenhoven. 2003). This involves various aptitudes, some of which seems to be susceptible to improvement using training techniques. Four of these aptitudes are: (1) the ability to enjoy, (2) the ability to choose, (3) the ability to keep developing, and (4) the ability to see meaning.

Learning to Enjoy

The ability to take pleasure from life is partly in-born (trait negativity-positivity), but can to some extent be cultivated. Learning to take pleasure from life was part of traditional leisure-class education, which emphasized prestigious pleasures, such as the tasting of exquisite wines and the appreciation of difficult music. Yet, it is also possible to develop an enjoyment of the common things in life, such as eating breakfast or watching the sunset. Training in savoring simple pleasures is part of some religious practices.

Hedonistic enjoyment is valued in present day modern society and figures prominently in advertisements. Yet, techniques that help us to gain the ability to enjoy are underdeveloped. There are no professional enjoyment trainers, at least no trainers

aiming at improving our general level of enjoyment. There is professional guidance for specific types of pleasures, such as how to appreciate fine arts, and often the main goal is to sell a particular product.

Still, it would seem possible to develop wider enjoyment training techniques. One way could be to provide training in "attentiveness," possibly using meditation techniques. Another option could be the broadening of one's repertoire of leisure activities, which could link up with expertise in various stimulation programs. A third way could be looking at ways to remove inner barriers to enjoy, which could be linked to clinical treatment of a-hedonia.

Learning to Choose

Happiness depends on also the choices one makes in life and hence also on one's ability to choose. The art of choosing involves several skills.

One such skill is getting to know what the options are. This aptitude can be improved by learning, and this is one of the things we do in consumer education. Expertise in this field can be used for training in the charting of wider life options. Another requirement is an ability to estimate how well the various options would fit one's nature. This requires self-knowledge and that is also something that can be improved, self-insight being a common aim in training and psychotherapy. Once one knows what to choose, there is often a problem of carrying through. This phase requires aptitudes such as perseverance, assertiveness, and creativity, all of which can be strengthened and are, in fact, common objectives in vocational trainings. The next step in the choice process is assessing the outcomes, in terms of the above-mentioned distinction, whether "expected utility" fits "experienced utility." This phase calls for openness to one's feelings and a realistic view on one's overall mood pattern. Training in mood monitoring is a common practice in psychotherapy and could possibly be improved using computer-based techniques of experience sampling.

The problem is not so much to develop such training techniques, but to separate the chaff from the corn. That will require independent effect studies. Once such techniques have been proven to be effective, a market culture will develop.

Learning to Grow

Happiness depends largely on the gratification of basic needs, and an important class of such needs is "growth needs" (Maslow, 1954), also referred to as "functioning needs" or "mastery needs." These needs are not restricted to higher mental functions; they also concern the use and development of the body and senses. In animals, gratification of these needs is largely guided by instinct, but in humans, it requires conscious action. Cultures typically provide standard action patterns for this purpose, such as providing for vocational career scripts or artistic interests, but people must also make choices of their own, in particular in multiple-choice societies. Failure to involve oneself in challenging activities may lead one to diffused discontent or even depression, this, for example, happens regularly after retirement from work. Thus, another art of living is to keep oneself going and developing.

Intervention would also seem possible in this case. Mere information will probably be useful and one can also think of various ways to get people going. Once again training techniques can build on available experience, and in this case, experience in various activation programs. There is already an ample supply of "growth trainings" on the peripheries of psychology, but, as yet, little evidence is available for the effectiveness of such interventions and certainly no proof of long-term effects on happiness.

Helping to See Meaning

Probably, but not certainly, happiness also depends on one seeing meaning in one's life. Though it is not sure that we have an innate need for meaningfulness as such, the idea of it provides at least a sense of coherence. Seeing a meaning in one's life requires (that one develops a view of one's life and that one can see worth in it. These mental knacks can also be strengthened, and it is possible that one can also learn to live with the philosophical uncertainties that surround this issue. There is experience on this matter in existential counseling and in practices such as "life reviewing" (Holahan, Holahan, & Wonacott, 1999) and "logo therapy" (Frankl, 1946). As far as I know, the impact of such interventions on happiness has yet to be investigated.

4.3.2 Information: Enabling more informed choice

Another way of improving happiness at the individual level is to inform people about the consequences of major choices in life. We have to realize that we live in a "multiple-choice society." in which about 40% of the differences in happiness seems to be due to "intentional activity" (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004, p. 131). Better informed choices will give rise to greater happiness.

Life choices are for the most part based on expected happiness, for instance, we typically choose a profession we think we will like. Economists call this "expected utility," or "decision utility" and acknowledge that this may differ from later "experienced utility." because decisions are mostly made on the basis of incomplete information. An example of a malformed choice is the decision to accept a higher paying job that requires more commuting. People typically accept such jobs in the expectation that the extra money will compensate for the travel time, but follow-up research has shown that they are mostly wrong and that happiness tends to go down in such cases (Frey & Stutzer, 2004).

Research of this kind can help people to make more informed choices. Though there is no guarantee that things will work out in the same way for you, it is still useful to know how it has worked out for other people in the recent past. Such research is particularly useful if it concerns similar people. "This policy does not involve paternalism: it does not push people into a particular way of life, but it provides them with information for making a well-informed autonomous decision. Paternalism would only be involved if research is manipulated or its results communicated selectively, for instance, if the observed negative effect of parenthood on happiness is disguised (Veenhoven, 2007. World Database of Happiness: Correlational Findings on Happiness and Having Children).

This approach to the furthering of happiness is similar to the current evidence-based health education. As in the case of happiness, we are often not sure about the consequences of life style choices on our health. How much drinking is too much? Is eating raw vegetables really good for your health? We cannot answer such questions on the basis of our own experience, and common wisdom is often wrong. Hence, we increasingly look to the results of scientific studies that provide us with more information, the results of which are disseminated systematically.

As yet, the information basis for such a way of furthering happiness is still small. Although there is a considerable body of research on happiness, this research is typically cross-sectional and does not inform us about cause and effect. What we need is panel data that allows us to follow the effects of life choices over time. Still another problem is that current happiness research deals mainly with things over which we have little control, such as personality and social background. What we need is research into things we can choose, for example, working part time or full time or raising a family or not.

Once such information becomes available, it will quickly be disseminated to the public, through the life style press and the self-help literature. It can also be included in organized health education, broadened to become education for "living well" happiness education. The problem is not in the dissemination of knowledge but in the production of it.

4.3.3 *Professional life counseling*

If we feel unhealthy, we go to a medical general practitioner, who makes a diagnosis and either prescribes a treatment or refers us to a medical specialist. If we feel unhappy, there is no such generalist. We have to guess about the possible causes ourselves, and on that basis, consult a specialist who may be a psychologist, a marriage counselor, or a lawyer. Professional guidance for a happier life is unavailable as yet. This is a remarkable market failure, given the large number of people who feel they could be happier. The size of the demand is reflected in the booming sales of self-help books and the willingness to pay for things that promise greater happiness, such as cosmetic surgery and second homes. The main reason is probably that the knowledge basis for such a profession is still small and that trust in happiness counseling is undermined by the many snake oil merchants operating in this area.

Still there seems to be a future for professional counseling for a happier life and for related life coaching and trainings. There is demand for such services, but as yet no proper supply. Much can be gained by developing that supply. One of the ways forward is to stimulate the professionalization of current activities in that area, among other things, by following people who use such services to establish what interventions added to happiness or did not. The development of professional life counseling could also profit from the above-advised research into long-term changes in happiness following major life choices.

5 DO WE NEED GREATER HAPPINESS?

If we *can* create greater happiness for a greater number, *should* we? Several voices say "no." Part of the objections comes from preachers of penitence, who like to see us suffer to clean our sinful souls. Yet, there are also objections from scientists who believe that the pursuit of happiness involves negative effects. One of their qualms is that mass happiness will be achieved at the cost of freedom, and another misgiving is that happy people tend to be passive and uncreative. These notions figure in Huxley's (1932) science fiction novel *Brave New World*, in which happiness for everybody is achieved using genetic manipulations and mind control and where the happy citizens are short-sighted consumer slaves.

Yet, research into the consequences of happiness shows another picture. It appears that happiness fosters activity, creativity, and an open mind. Happy people do better as a spouse and parent. They are also better citizens; they are typically better informed than unhappy compatriots; they involve themselves more in social action, while being more moderate in their political views (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Still another thing is that happiness lengthens life, the effect of happiness being comparable to smoking or not (Veenhoven, 2008). This evidence on positive effects of happiness fits well with the theory that feeling good works as a "go-signal"; it tells the organism that the situation is OK and it can go ahead. Consequently, happy people "broaden" their behavioral scope and "build" more resources (Fredrickson, 2004).

So, happiness is worth pursuing for its own sake, and for its positive side effects.

References

- Bentham. J. (1970). In: J. H. Burns & H. L. A Hart (Ed.). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. London: Althone Press (original work published 1789 by London: Payne).
- Easterlin. R. A. (1995). *Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?* Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization. 27, 35-47.
- Frankl. V. E. (1946). *De zin van het bestaan. een inleiding tot de logotherapie/The meaning of life an introduction to logotherapy, (Nederlandse vertaling 2002)*. Rotterdam: Donker.
- Fredrickson. B. L. (2004). *The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions*. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B. Biological Sciences. 359, 1367-1377.
- Frey. B. & Stutzer. A. (2004). *Economic consequences of mispredicting utility*, Working paper. Institute for Empirical Research in Economics, Zürich. Switzerland. Available at: www.crema-research.ch/papers
- Headley. B.. & Wearing. A. (1992). *Understanding happiness: A theory of subjective well-being*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Holahan. C. K., Holahan. C. J., & Wonacott, N. L. (1999). *Self appraisal, life satisfaction and retrospective life choices across one and three decades*, Psychology and Aging. 14. 238-244.
- Huxley. A. (1932). *Brave new world*, London: Shatto & Windus.
- Layard. R. (2003). *Happiness: Lessons of a new science*, New York: Penguin.
- Lykken. D. T. (1999). *Happiness: What studies on twins show us about nature, nurture and the happiness set-point*, New York: Golden Books.
- Lyubomirsky. S., King. L. A., & Diener. E. (2005). *The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success?* Psychological Bulletin, 131, 803-855.
- Maslow. A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*, New York: Harper.
- Ouweneel, P. (2002). *Social Security and well-being of the unemployed in 42 nations*, Journal of Happiness Studies. 3, 167-192.
- Sheldon, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2004). *Achieving sustainable new happiness: Prospects, practices and prescriptions*, In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.). Positive psychology in practice (pp. 127-145) Hoboken: Wiley.

- Veenhoven. R. (1991). *Is happiness relative?*, Social Indicators Research, 24, 1-34.
- Veenhoven. R. (1995). *The cross national pattern of happiness: Tests of predictions implied in three theories of happiness*, Social Indicators Research. 34, 33-68.
- Veenhoven. R. (2000), *Well-being in the welfare state: Level not higher, distribution not more equitable*, Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis. 2. 91-125.
- Veenhoven. R. (2003). *Arts of living*, Journal of Happiness Studies. 4, 373-384.
- Veenhoven. R. (2005). *Apparent quality of life: How long and happy people live*, Social Indicators Research. 71, 61-86.
- Veenhoven. R. (2007). *World Database of Happiness*, continuous register of scientific research on subjective enjoyment of life. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam:
<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>.
- Veenhoven. R. (2008). *Healthy happiness: Effects of happiness on physical health and the consequences for preventive health care*, Journal of Happiness Studies. 9(3), 449-469.
- Veenhoven. R. (2009). *How do we assess how happy we are?* In A. Dull & B. Radcliff (Eds). Happiness, economics and politics (pp. 45-69). Northampton: Edward Elger.
- Veenhoven. R., & Hagerty. M. (2006). *Rising Happiness in nations 1946-2004: A reply to Easterlin*, Social Indicators Research. 77, 1-16.

Note

1. Average of several surveys. Reported in World Database of Happiness. Happiness in Nations. Rank Report 2007-1.

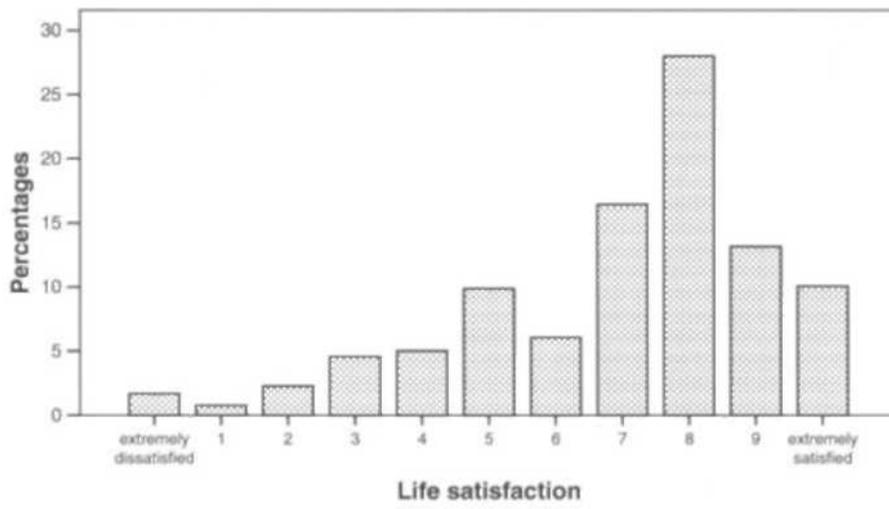


Fig. 1.1 Happiness in Germany (Data: European Social Survey 2003)

Table 1.1 Happiness in nations around 2000

Nation	Happiness Average on scale 0-10
Denmark	8.2
Switzerland	8.1
Sweden	7.7
USA	7.4
Germany	7.2
France	6.5
Japan	6.2
Poland	5.9
Russia	4.4
Zimbabwe	3.3

Source: World Database of Happiness, (Veenhoven 2010) Happiness in Nations. Rank Report 2007-1

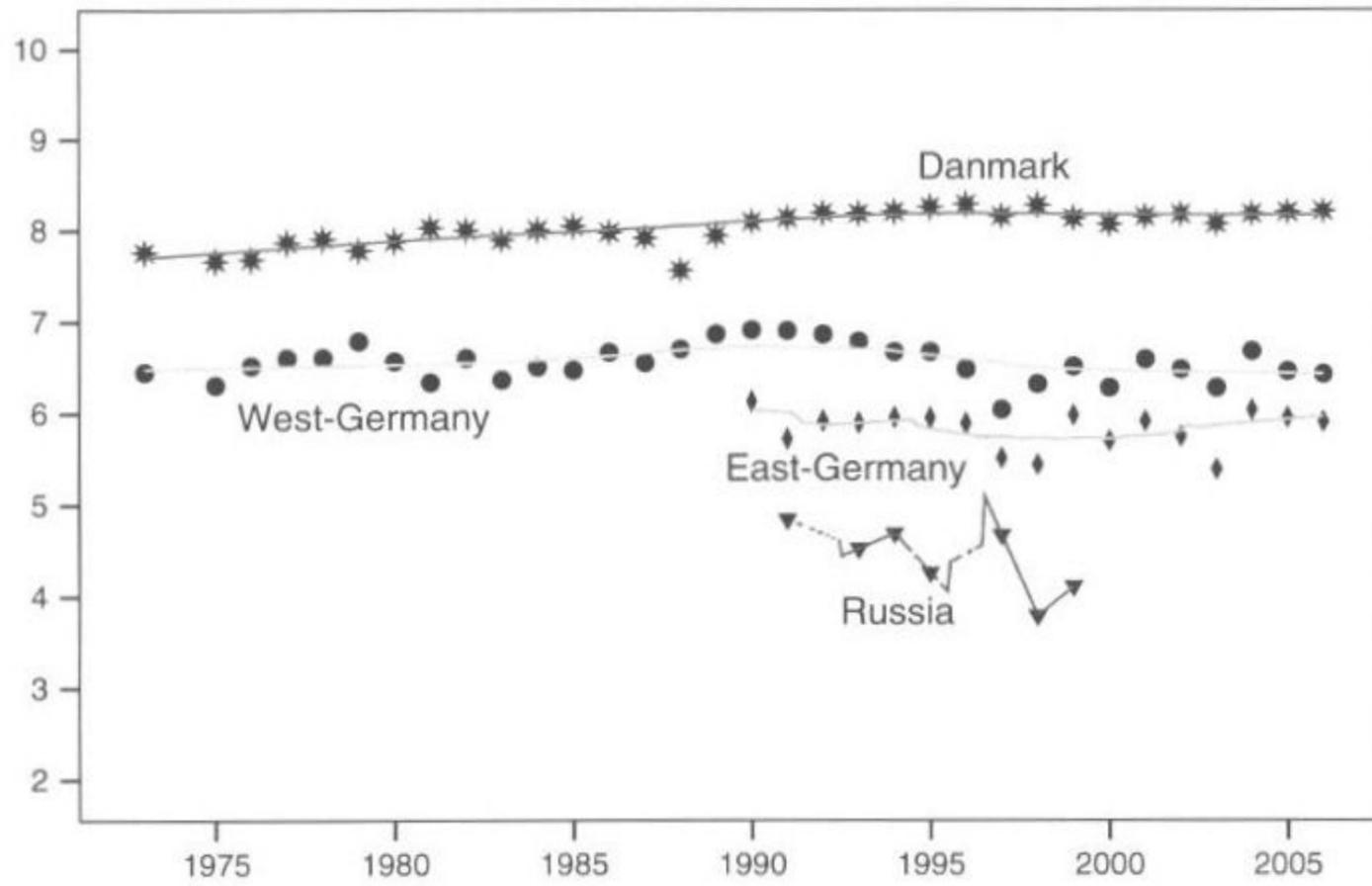


Figure 1.2 Trend average happiness in three nations (Source: World Database of Happiness, (Veenhoven 2010) data file TrendsInNations)

Table 1.2 Societal correlates of happiness

	Condition in nation	Correlation with average happiness		N
		Zero-order	Wealth controlled	
Wealth	Purchasing power per head	.65		88
Freedom	Economic	.60	.26	88
	Political	.48	.17	90
	Personal'	.35	-.13	83
Equality	Inequality of incomes	.05	.42	82
	Discrimination of women	-.52	-.25	58
Brotherhood	Tolerance	.52	.40	76
	Trust in compatriots	.39	.17	79
	Social security	.35	-.16	66
Justice	Rule of law	.64	.20	90
	Respect of civil rights	.47	.09	90
	Corruption	-.56	-.03	62
Explained variance				60

•'Not included in regression due to limited number of cases *Data*'.

World Database of Happiness, data file "States of Nations"