

GREATER HAPPINESS FOR A GREATER NUMBER

Is that possible in Mexico?

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What is the final goal of public policy? Jeremy Bentham (1789) would say: *greater happiness for a greater number*. He thought of happiness as subjective enjoyment of life; in his words as “the sum of pleasures and pains”. In his time the happiness of the great number could not be measured and it was therefore difficult to assess how happiness can be furthered and 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 have applied such questions in large scale surveys of the general population. Their findings are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012a). In this chapter I use these findings to answer the question whether greater happiness is possible in Mexico. To that end I will first consider in more detail what happiness is and how it can be measured.

1 WHAT IS ‘HAPPINESS’?

A preliminary step is to explain what I mean with the word ‘happiness’. The word ‘happiness’ has different meanings. In the widest sense, ‘happiness’ 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’. Below I will delineate four different *qualities* of life and show that my concept of happiness fits only one of these.

1.1 Four qualities of life

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. The first distinction is between *chances* and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between *external* and *internal* features. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in Scheme 1.

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Livability of the environment

The left top quadrant of **Scheme 1** denotes the meaning of good living conditions, in brief ‘livability’. Economists associate livability with access to goods and services. Ecologists see it in the natural environment and describe livability in terms of pollution, global warming, and degradation of nature. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, traffic jams, and ghetto formation. In the sociological view, society is central. Livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole and also with the position one has in society.

Livability is not what is called happiness here. It is rather a precondition for happiness, and not all environmental conditions are equally conducive to happiness.

Life-ability of the person

The right top quadrant of **Scheme 1** denotes inner life-chances. That is, how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life Sen (1992) calls this quality-of-life variant ‘capability’. I prefer the simple term ‘life-ability’, which contrasts elegantly with ‘livability’.

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is “health” in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as ‘negative health’. Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as ‘positive health’ and associated with energy and resilience. A further step is to evaluate capability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new skills for living. This is commonly denoted by the term ‘self-actualization’. Since abilities do not develop alongside idleness, this quality of life is close to ‘activity’ in Aristotle’s concept of eudemonia.

An ability to deal with the problems of life will mostly contribute to happiness as defined here, but it is not identical to happiness. If one is competent at living, one has a good chance at happiness, but being thus endowed does not guarantee an enjoyable life outcome.

Usefulness of life

The left bottom quadrant of **Scheme 1** represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes a life has some higher values. There is no current generic term for these external outcomes of life. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to these effects as ‘transcendental’ conceptions of quality of life. Another appellation is ‘meaning of life’ which then denotes “true” significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning.

When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider several aspects. One aspect is what that a person’s life does to the quality of life of other people, such as how well a mother raises her children or how many lives are saved by a medical doctor. Another aspect is the contribution made by a life to human civilization, such as in inventions or exemplary moral behavior. Still another aspect is what a life does to the ecological system.

An individual’s life can have many environmental effects that may differ in the short term and in the long term, and these cannot be meaningfully collated. Still another problem is that these effects can be judged from different perspectives. Hence it is quite difficult to grasp this quality of life.

Leading an objectively useful life may contribute to one’s subjective appreciation of life, but it may also come at the cost of that. So, useful living is not the same a happy living.

Core meaning: Subjective enjoyment of life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant of **Scheme 1** represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the quality of a life in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective enjoyment of life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as ‘subjective well-being’, ‘life satisfaction’, and ‘happiness’ in a limited sense of the word. This is the kind of happiness Jeremy Bentham had in mind, and it is also the kind of happiness addressed here.

1.2 Four kinds of satisfaction

Even when we focus on subjective satisfaction with life, there are still different meanings associated with the word happiness. These meanings can also be charted in a fourfold matrix. In this case, that classification is based on the following dichotomies: part-of-life versus life-as-a-whole, and passing delight versus enduring satisfaction. These distinctions produce the fourfold matrix presented in **Scheme 2**.

Pleasure

The top-left quadrant of **Scheme 2** represents passing enjoyments of life-aspects. Examples would be delight in a cup of tea at breakfast, the satisfaction of a chore done, or the enjoyment of a piece of art. I refer to this category as ‘pleasures’. Kahneman (1999) calls it ‘instant-utilities’.

The concept of happiness used here is broader and concerns “overall satisfaction” with life-as-a-whole. Though fleeting enjoyment obviously contributes to a positive appreciation of life, it is not the whole of it.

Satisfaction with life domains

The top right quadrant of **Scheme 2** denotes enduring appreciation of life-aspects, such as marriage satisfaction and job satisfaction. This is currently referred to as ‘domain satisfactions’. Though domain satisfactions depend typically on a continuous flow of pleasures, they have some continuity of their own. For instance, one can remain satisfied with one’s marriage even if one has not enjoyed the company of the spouse for some time.

Domain satisfactions are often denoted with the term happiness: a happy marriage, happy with one’s job, etc. Yet I use the term happiness in the broader sense of satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. One would not call a person happy who is satisfied with their marriage and job but still dissatisfied on the whole because his or her health is failing. It is even possible that someone is satisfied with all the domains one can think of but nevertheless feels depressed.

Peak-experience

The bottom right quadrant of **Scheme 2** denotes the combination of passing experience and appraisal of life-as-a-whole. This combination occurs typically in peak-experiences, which involve short-lived but quite intense feelings and the perception of wholeness. This is the kind of happiness poets write about.

Again, this is not the kind of happiness aimed at here. A moment of bliss is not the same as enduring appreciation of life. In fact, such top-experiences even seem detrimental to lasting satisfaction with life, possibly because of their disorientating effects (Diener et al., 1991).

Core Meaning: *Lasting Satisfaction with One's Life-as-a-Whole*

Lastly, the bottom-right quadrant of **Scheme 2** represents the combination of enduring satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. This is what I mean when I use the word happiness. A synonym is “life satisfaction.” This is the meaning at stake in Jeremy Bentham’s “greatest happiness principle.” When speaking about the “sum” of pleasures and pains, he denoted a balance over time and thus a durable matter.

1.3 Definition of happiness

In this line I define happiness as *the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favorably*. In other words: how much one likes the life one leads. I have elaborated this concept elsewhere (Veenhoven, 1984, chapter 2).

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
dissatisfied satisfied

Though currently used in surveys such as the World values Survey (Inglehart & Welzel 2005) and the Gallup World Poll, these questions are much criticized.

Validity

Though these questions are fairly clear, responses can be flawed in several ways. Responses may reflect how happy people think they should be rather than how happy they actually feel and it is also possible that people present themselves happier as than they actually are. These suspicions have given rise to numerous validation studies. Elsewhere I have reviewed this research and concluded that there is no evidence that responses to these questions measure something other than what they are meant to measure (Veenhoven 1984: chapter 3). Though this is no guarantee that research will never reveal a deficiency, we can trust these measures of happiness for the time being.

Reliability

Research has also shown that responses are affected by minor variations in wording and ordering of questions and by situational factors, such as the race of the interviewer or the weather. As a result the same person may score 6 in one investigation and 7 in another. This lack of precision hampers analyses at the individual level. It is less of a problem when average happiness in groups is compared, since random fluctuations tend to balance. This is typically the case when happiness is used in policy evaluation.

Comparability

Still, the objection is made that responses on such questions are not comparable, because a score of 6 does not mean the same for everybody.

A common philosophical argument for this position is that happiness depends on the realization of wants and that these wants differ across persons and cultures (Smart & Williams 1973). Yet it is not at all sure that happiness depends on the realization of idiosyncratic wants. The available data are more in line with the theory that it depends on the gratification of universal needs (Veenhoven 2009a).

A related qualm holds that is happiness a typical western concept that is not recognized in other cultures. Yet happiness appears to be a universal emotion that is recognized in facial expression all over the world and for which words exists in all languages. Consequently the non-response to question about happiness appears to be low all over the world (Veenhoven 2010).

Another objection is that happiness is a unique experience that cannot be communicated on an equivalent scale. This qualm roots also in a constructivist view of man. Yet from an evolutionary point of view it is unlikely that we differ very much. As in the case of pain, there will be a common human spectrum of experience. In the related functional 'signal' view of affect it is not plausible either that happiness is something idiosyncratic. The data also tell a different story. If happiness cannot be communicated on an equivalent scale, there will be little correlation between subjective happiness and objective living conditions. Yet research shows several sizable correlations, some of which are presented in the schemes 5, 8 and 9 of this paper.

Lastly there is methodological reservation about possible cultural-bias in the measurement of happiness, due to problems with translation of keywords and cultural variation in response tendencies. Elsewhere I have looked for empirical evidence for these distortions, but did not find any (Veenhoven 2012d).

3 HOW HAPPY ARE THE MEXICANS?

Most Mexicans are happy. That appears from their responses to the following question in the 2007 Gallup World Poll: *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?* Please indicate in a number from 0 to 10, where 0 is 'dissatisfied' and 10 'satisfied'. The average score was 7.7.

Unfortunately the full distribution of responses to that question is not available. **Scheme 3** presents the distribution of responses to a slightly different question that figured in a survey in 2010.

3.1 Rank of happiness in nations

How does Mexican's happiness rank in comparison to other nations? Some illustrative findings are presented in **Scheme 4**. Though Mexico is in the middle of this list, it is actually in the top range of the World. As one can see average happiness varies between 8,4 (Denmark) and 3,1 (Zimbabwe) and with 7,9 Mexico ranks high in that 11 point interval.

3.2 Trend over time

Have Mexicans always been so happy? The first survey in Mexico that involved a question about happiness was held in 1948 (Buchanan & Cantril 1953). The average score on the three step question used in that study was 1.6, which equals a score of 3.9 on scale 0-10¹. That is 4 points lower than the average of 7.9 observed 50 years later.

Scheme 5 presents the time graph of average happiness in Mexico together with time graphs in three more nations. We see considerable fluctuations, such as the dramatic decline of average happiness in Russia, following the Ruble crisis in 1995 and the remarkable rise over the last 10 years. In the case of Mexico we also see considerable fluctuations, but these may partly be due to variations in measurement, since the data are drawn from different surveys. Data quality is best in Denmark and that is one of the reasons why we see less fluctuations in this case.

4 IS 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. Some sociologists draw the same conclusion, because they think that happiness depends on social comparison and that you are not better off than the neighbors if conditions for everybody improve. In that vein the case of the USA is often mentioned as an example; material wealth would have doubled there since the 1950s while average happiness remained at the same level.

Yet these scientists are wrong. Firstly there is a clear relation between average happiness and societal quality. Think of the above mentioned case of Zimbabwe with an average of 3.1. Apparently people cannot live happy in a failed state, even if their neighbors suffer the same. Secondly, **Scheme 5** illustrates that average happiness in nations does change over time and has changed to the better in several countries. Analysis of all available time-series learned that average happiness has risen in many more nations (Veenhoven & Vergunst 2012). Denmark is again a note-worthy case in this context. The Danes were the happiest people already in the 1970s, but became even happier since. So greater happiness is possible even at the top.

5 HOW CAN HAPPINESS BE RAISED?

Apparently, greater happiness for a greater number of Mexicans is possible, then how can that be achieved? I see possibilities at three levels: 1) at the micro level of individual citizens, 2) at the meso-level of organizations and 3) at the macro-level of society. I have discussed these options in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven 2011).

Strengthening life abilities

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 **Scheme 3**. 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; at least 30% of the variance can be attributed to variation in life-ability (Heady and Wearing 1990) and more than half of that is genetic (Bartels & Boosma 2009).

The relative importance of inner strengths should not surprise if we realize that living conditions are typically very good in modern nations; the better the external conditions, the less variation in conditions account for differences in happiness. In Paradise all the difference in happiness will be due to inner competence, neurotics quarreling there 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 is to strengthen life-abilities. Part of these abilities is genetically determined or hardly alterable for other reasons. Still, there are also capabilities that can be improved through therapy and training. Psycho-therapy is now well established in modern nations, but still under-utilized. There is also an emerging field of training in art-of-living in the line of the new 'positive psychology'. It would seem worth to stimulate the professionalization of that trade. Government could help by paying effect studies, so that the chaff can be separated from the corn. Once there is evidence that such training can raise happiness a bit, a self supporting market will develop.

Another way of improving happiness at the individual level is informing people about the consequences of major choices in life. 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: 131). Better informed choices will give rise to greater happiness. In that context governments could broaden 'Health education' to 'Happiness education'. Like in the case of health education there should be a solid evidence base, and good data about consequences of life choice are lacking at the moment.

What we need is follow-up studies on changes in happiness following life-decisions such as 'having a baby', 'moving to another country' or 'early retirement'. Such studies can show what has happened earlier to people like us who did what we consider to do now. If making major consumer decisions we often orient on tests of the consumer union. In making life-decisions we can have a similar information basis. An example of this approach is a study by Frey & Stutzer (2004) on the effects of accepting a higher paying job at a longer distance from home. They show that a lot of people mis-predict the effect on their own happiness.

Improving the livability of institutions

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

This requires that we know what settings produce most happiness, e.g. in what kind of schools pupils enjoy their school years most. Curiously, that has hardly been investigated as yet, not even in old age homes, the prime product of which is happy life years. There is a lot of talk about quality of life in institutions, but hardly any hard research. This is probably because there is little incentive to bother about happiness of pupils and residents.

Governments can create an incentive by investigating the happiness output of institutions. Once differences are visible, the market will do its work. For instance, 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.

Improving the livability of society

Happiness depends also on the quality of the wider society. As we have seen in [Scheme 4](#), there are wide differences in happiness across nations, and these differences are clearly linked to societal qualities, some of which are presented in [Scheme 6](#).

Will further economic growth make us happier? [Scheme 6](#) suggests so, because happiness is strongly correlated with wealth of the nation. Yet material affluence appears to be subject to the law of diminishing returns and economic growth yields more happiness in poor nations than in rich nations. Yet 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 this rise is linked to economic growth, directly or indirectly (Veenhoven & Vergunst 2012).

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

The data in [Scheme 6](#) do not suggest that reduction of income differences will add to happiness, the zero-order correlation is close to zero and when wealth of the nation is taken into account we see even a positive effect of income inequality (Berg & Veenhoven 2009). Though income inequality may be unfair, we can apparently live with it. Likewise, the data do not suggest that happiness can be advanced by more welfare state. At first sight there 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 illustration: happiness is fairly high in Sweden that is known for its extended welfare state, yet equally high in Iceland that spends much less on social security.

The greatest gains seem to be possible in the realms of freedom and justice. Good governance appears to contribute much to average happiness in nations, irrespective of the political color of the parties in the saddle (Ott 2010).

6 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 for cleansing 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 on 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 typically inform themselves better than unhappy compatriots, they involve more in social action, while being more moderate in their political views (Gruen 2009). 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 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 not only worth pursuing for its own sake, but also for its positive side effects.

Scheme 1
Four qualities of life

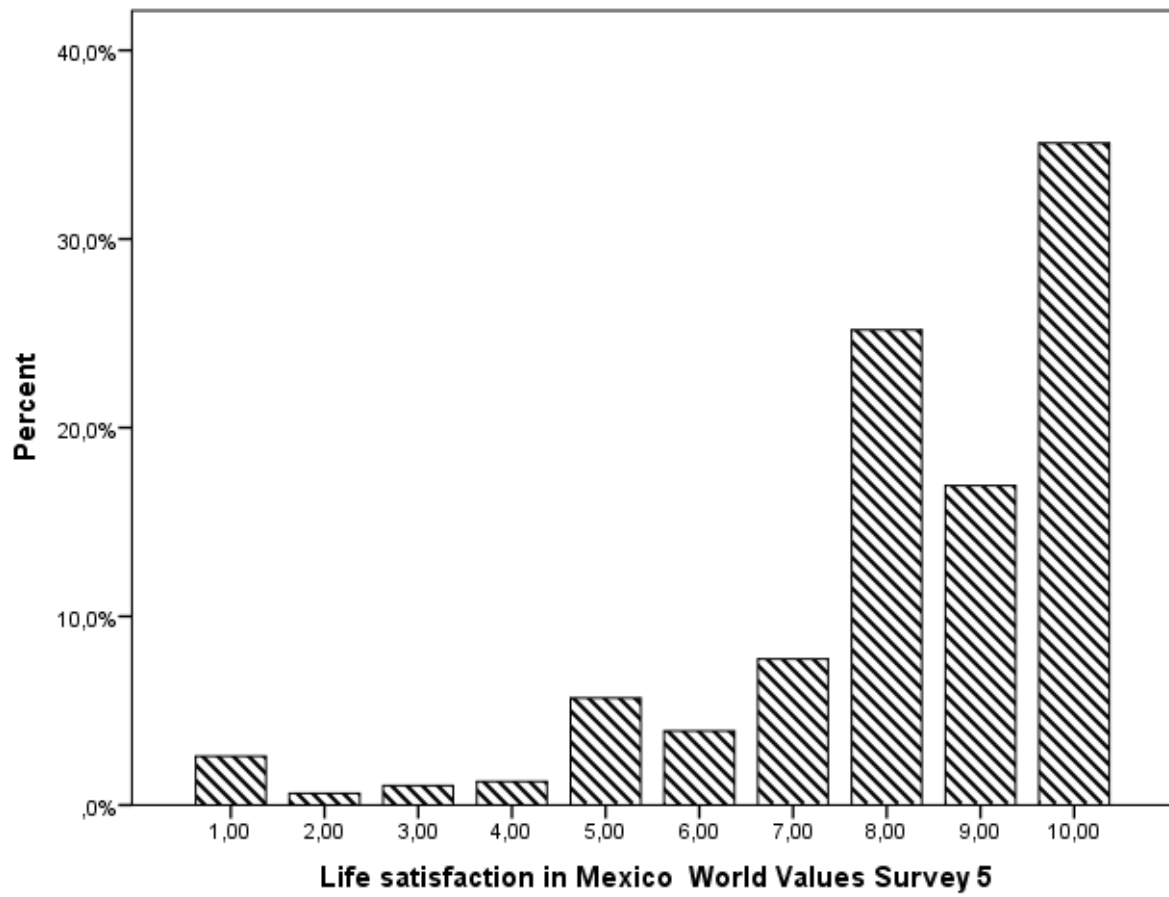
	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
<i>Life results</i>	Usefulness of life	Satisfaction with life

Source: Veenhoven 2000

Scheme 2
Four kinds of satisfaction

	<i>Passing</i>	<i>Enduring</i>
<i>Life aspects</i>	Pleasure	Domain satisfaction
<i>Life-as-a-whole</i>	Peak experience	Life satisfaction

Scheme 3
Happiness in Mexico

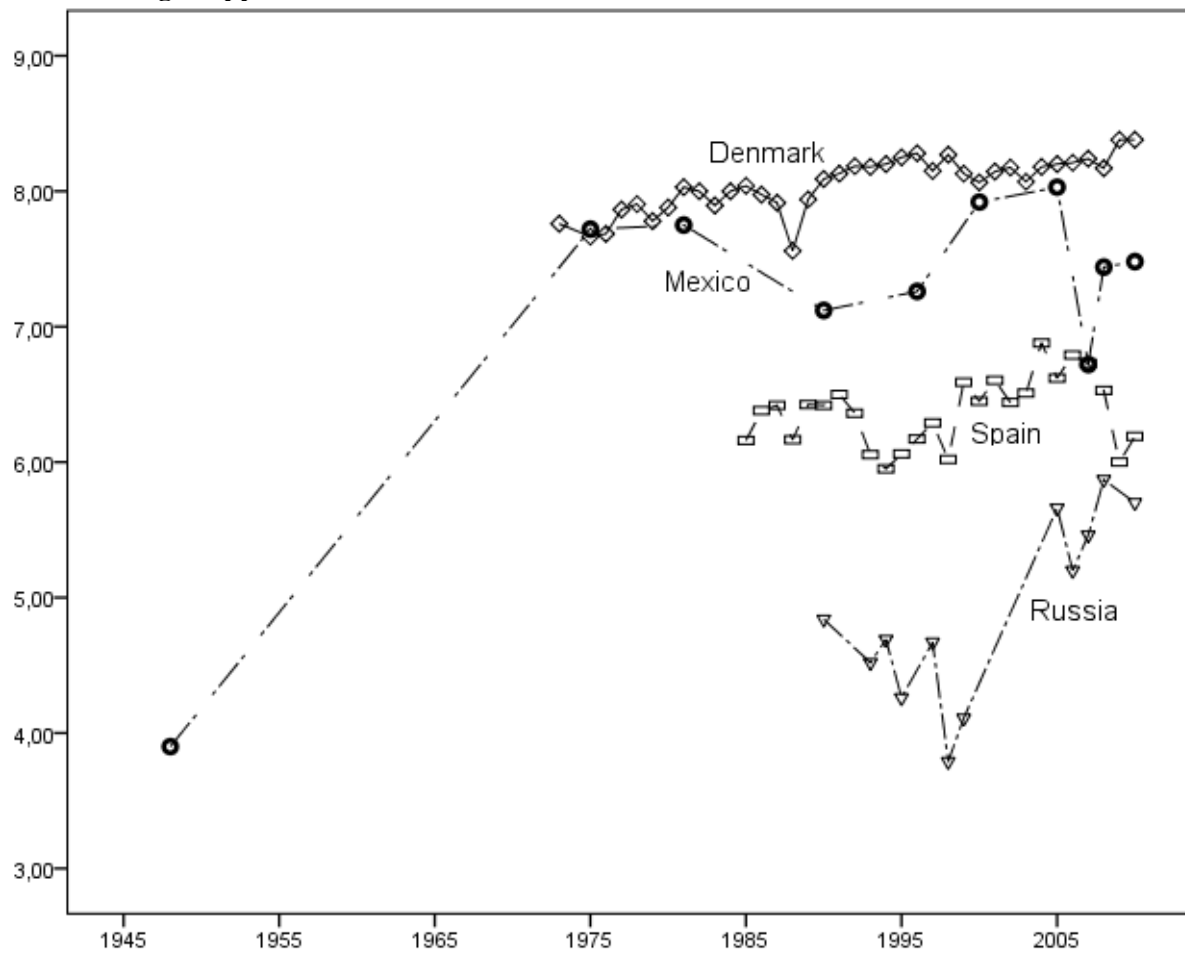


Scheme 4**Happiness in nations around 2000-2009; Average on scale 0-10**

• Denmark	8,4
• Sweden	8,2
• Switzerland	8,1
• Mexico	7,9
• USA	7,6
• Spain	7,2
• France	6,6
• Japan	6,5
• Russia	5,5
• Zimbabwe	3,1

Source: World Database of Happiness, Happiness in Nations² (Veenhoven 2012b)

Scheme 5
Trend average happiness in four nations



Source: World Database of Happiness, collection Happiness in Nations tables 121C/D and 122D/E

Scheme 6
Societal correlates of happiness

Condition in nation	Correlation with average happiness		
	Zero-order	GDP controlled	N
Economic development			
• Purchasing power p/c	+ .65	-	140
Institutional quality			
• Rule of law	+ .58	+ .04	147
• Quality of government	+ .62	+ .14	146
• Corruption	- .57	+ .03	83
Freedom			
• Economic	+ .40	- .23	143
• Political	+ .50	+ .12	146
• Personal*	+ .46	+ .03	84
Equality			
• Equality of incomes	- .10	+ .23	121
• Male/female equality	+ .55	+ .15	86
Security			
• Physical safety	- .36*	- .27	65
• Murder rate	+ .15	+ .49	105
• Social security	+ .36	- .13	77
Explained variance	R ² = .63		

Source: World Database of Happiness: States of nations (Veenhoven 2012c)

* = not included in regression due to limited number of cases

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NOTES

1 The question was: “How satisfied are you with the way you are getting on now? very satisfied, satisfied, not satisfied?” These options were ticked by were respectively 20%, 18% and 61% of the respondents. These scores were transformed to range 0-10 using data from the happiness scale interval study (Veenhoven 2009), in which 94 Spanish speaking students rated the intervals covered by each of these three response options . See http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/scalestudy/itemreports/osls_c_3aa.html

2 Tables 122 E (10-step life-satisfaction and 122D (11 step life-satisfaction. All scores transformed to range 0-10