

WHY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY OF HAPPINESS FALLS SHORT¹

Ruut Veenhoven²

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1 Happiness neglected in sociology

Happiness is no great issue in sociology. Though the subject was on the agenda of the 19th century founding fathers of sociology, such as Auguste Comte (Ple 2000) and Herbert Spencer (1857), it is now typically absent in main-stream sociological textbooks and journals (Veenhoven 2014). This is the more remarkable because interest in happiness has risen in the neighboring fields of social indicators research, positive psychology and happiness economics. Why do sociologists overlook this matter? I see three kinds of reasons: pragmatic, ideological and theoretical.

To begin with the pragmatic reasons, sociologists are typically more interested in what people do than in how they feel. Their main objective is to explain social behavior and happiness is at best a variable in that context. A related point is that sociology is about collectivities, while happiness is an individual level concept. A further pragmatic reason is that sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems. So, if they look at subjective well being at all, they focus on ill being in the first place.

This focus on ill-being fits ideological reasons. Many sociologists are committed to notions of objective wellbeing, such as social equality and social cohesion. They are therefore not eager to investigate how people actually feel in such conditions, and when they do, they often ignore contradictory results. For instance, when people appear to feel subjectively good in conditions deemed to be objectively bad, this is easily disposed of as 'desirability bias' or 'false consciousness'.

Next there are also theoretical reasons to disregard happiness. Sociologists tend to think of happiness as a mere idea that depends on social comparison with variable standards and that is, therefore, a whimsical state of mind, not worth pursuing and hence not worth studying. Below I will consider these views in more detail and discuss their theoretical plausibility and empirical tenability.

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² Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands and North-West University in South Africa

2 Presumed social construction of happiness

Social construction theory is about how we make sense of things. It assumes that we 'construct' mental representations, using collective notions as building blocks. In this view, happiness is regarded as a social construction, comparable to notions like 'beauty' and 'fairness'. A common reasoning in this line is that happiness depends on shared notions about life and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals.

One of the ways this is assumed to work is seeing the glass half full or half empty, optimistic cultures tending to highlight the positive aspects of life, while pessimistic cultures emphasize its shortcomings. Americans have been mentioned as an example of the former view and the French of the latter, e.g. by Ostroot & Scheider (1985). In this line Inglehart (1990:30) has suggested that happiness is lower in France than in the US because life was harder in France for earlier generations and this is echoed in a more pessimistic outlook on life today.

Another cognitive mechanism assumed to gear happiness is comparison with shared notions of the good life. In this view, happiness is the gap between perceptions of life-as-it-is with notions of how-life-should-be. In this line it is commonly argued that the advertising industry reduces our wellbeing, because it fosters dreams of a life that is out of reach for the common man (Layard 2005). Another example of this view is the claim that the high levels of happiness in modern nations result from giving up hope for a better life.

An additional mechanism that has been mentioned is that we see ourselves typically through the eyes of others and hence also judge our happiness through their eyes. In this view, happiness is a 'reflected appraisal'. We will be positive about our life when people around us deem us to be well off and negative when others see us as losers. In this vein the lower happiness among singles has been explained as the result of a negative stereotype: because singles are 'labeled' as pitiful they come to see themselves as miserable, in spite of the apparent advantages of single living (e.g. Davies & Strong 1977).

The constructionist view implies that there is little value to happiness, happiness being a mere idea. Since notions about the good life vary across time and culture, happiness is also seen to be culturally relative. A life that is deemed perfect in one idea of the good life may be seen to be a failure from perspective. For this reason this theory is popular among the critics of Bentham's (1789) moral philosophy, i.e. that we should aim at "greater happiness for a greater number"; it reduces happiness to something insignificant.

2.1 *Theoretical plausibility*

It is beyond doubt that shared notions frame much of our appraisals, yet this is not to say that all awareness is socially constructed. We need no shared notions to experience pain or hunger; culture at best modifies our reflection on these experiences somewhat. Our understanding draws also on external stimuli and on inner signals. The question thus is: How does this work in the case of happiness?

When striking the balance of their life, people appear to use their mood as the prime source of information (Schwartz & Strack 1991) and consequently overall happiness correlates typically stronger with hedonic level of affect than with contentment. There is logic in this, since the affect system is evolutionary older and serves to ascertain that an organism's basic needs are met. The cognitive system developed on top of this in *homo sapiens*, but it has not replaced the affective system. It is rather an additional device that allows better learning from experience and planning of activities. In this light it is unlikely that happiness is merely due to cognitive appraisal.

2.2 Empirical support

The reality value of this view cannot be tested as such, because the human mind is still a black box. Yet we can check its aptness indirectly, when we consider the implications of the theory that happiness is a mere social construction.

Culture specific?

One implication is that conditions for happiness will be variable across cultures. If happiness is a culture specific construct, its determinants will also be culturally specific. Hence empirical studies on correlates of happiness must show considerable cultural variation and hardly any universal pattern. Yet the available data show otherwise.

Comparison of average happiness across nations reveals a common pattern. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that provide a decent material standard of living, that are politically democratic and well governed and where the cultural climate is characterized by trust and tolerance. Together objective societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in happiness across nations.

Comparison of correlations within nations also shows much similarity. In all countries, the married appear to be happier than singles (Diener, 2000) and health is also a strong correlate of happiness all over the world, both physical health and mental health. Likewise, the differences in happiness across age and gender are typically small everywhere (Veenhoven 2010).

Variable over time?

A second implication is that happiness must be variable over time. If happiness depends on shared notions of the good life, it will vary with fads about that matter and this must be reflected in erratic movements in average happiness in nations, comparable to changes in political preferences and tastes for music. Yet again this not what the data show. Average happiness appears to be very stable over time, at least in western nations over the last 30 years, where happiness has risen slightly without many fluctuations (cf. section 1.2). Follow-up studies at the individual level also show considerable constancy over time (Ehrhardt et. al. 2000).

Inconsequential?

A third implication is that happiness is of little consequence. If happiness is sheer

cognitive spin, based on fashionable ideas, it will not matter much whether it pans out positively or negatively. Happiness is then a petty appraisal, such as a person's preference for one kind of wallpaper or another; nice in itself but of no consequence for anything more than that.

Once more, this appears not to be the case. Happiness appears to go hand in hand with objective thriving and follow-up studies have shown that happiness is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity (e.g. Danner et. al 2000, Veenhoven 2008)

3 Presumed product of social comparison

All sociologists learn in their student days about the exemplary case of 'relative deprivation' described in Stouffer's (1949) classic study 'The American Soldier'. One of the things assessed in this study is the satisfaction with promotion chances and contrary to expectation the satisfaction with this aspect of army life appeared to be higher in units where promotion chances were low, such as the military police, than in units where promotion chances were high, such as the air force. This phenomenon was explained in terms of social comparison; because promotion was more common in the air force, air force personnel more often felt they were entitled to promotion. This case of satisfaction with promotion makes many sociologists think that all satisfaction depends on social comparison.

Social comparison theory is a variant of a wider comparison theory that links up with the above mentioned notion that happiness is the difference between life-as-it-is and how-life-should-be. The smaller these discrepancies are, the higher the happiness is assumed to be. In this theory there can be multiple discrepancies; among other things discrepancies between what one has and what one thinks that one could have, and discrepancies between what one has and what one feels entitled to (Michalos 1985). Perceptions of what one could have and what would be fair to have are seen to be drawn from social comparison. In this view, happiness is a matter of keeping up with the Jones's; we feel well if we do better and bad if we do worse than those we compare ourselves to.

In this theory there is little hope for achieving greater happiness for a greater number, since improving the living conditions for all will also improve the life of the Jones's, leaving the relative differences as before. Social comparison is one of the mechanisms in the idea that we are on a 'hedonic treadmill' that presumably nullifies all progress (Brickman & Campbell 1971) and it is the main mechanism in Easterlin's (1974) theory that economic growth does not add to happiness. In this view we can at best mitigate the effects of social comparison somewhat if we make the differences less visible. In this line Frank (1999) has advised that conspicuous consumption should be discouraged with heavy taxes on luxury goods and Layard (2005) recommends taxing high incomes more. Limiting advertisement is also suggested in this context, in particular commercials that use pictures of a life that is out of reach of the common man.

3.1 Theoretical plausibility

There are several problems with this psychological theory. First it is clear that social comparison does not apply to all subjective appraisals. When I hit my finger with a hammer, I feel pain and my finger does not hurt less if my neighbor Jones does the same thing. When appraising our situation, we use various sources of information, and social comparison is only one of these.

This brings us to the question of what value social comparison could be for assessing how well one lives. Obviously, that value is limited to aspects of life where social comparison is possible, such as your income, but not to less visible aspects such your sex life or the pleasure you take from watching a sunset. Even where we can measure up to the Jones this evidently informs us about what is *possible* in life, but not necessarily about what is *desirable* or *enjoyable*. Looking over the fence of my neighbor Jones I can see that I lag behind in the number of beer cans emptied, but this does not tell me whether I would be better off if I drank more. Advocates of social comparison theory would retort that we compare only on things that are socially valued in society, such as money and fame, and this links up with the assumption that notions of the good life are socially constructed. Yet even if beer boozing were highly valued in my society, and if I wholeheartedly supported that value, I would end up less well if I drank more than my dipsomaniacal neighbor Jones. That is evident because drinking too much is bad for the body, irrespective of how I think about this.

This example illustrates a major flaw in comparison theory: it forgets that we are biological organisms. Obviously we cannot feel well if our body is harmed. Affective alarms start to ring when we do not get enough food or when our temperature falls too low. Less obvious, but no less present are psychological needs, such as the need to belong and to use and develop our potentials. We feel lousy when lonely and bored when unchallenged. Humans are not born as *tabula rasa*, on which socialization imprints culture specific wants, we are pre-wired to need some things and as a result feel good when these needs are met.

In this respect we are very much like our fellow animals. Dogs and cats can also feel good or bad and evidently do not calculate their happiness by comparing shared standards of the good life. Evolution has simply programmed them to feel good or bad subjectively in situations that are good or bad for their survival objectively. Our affective system is not much different from that of dogs and cats, and also serves to make us do intuitively what is good for us. Human cognition has developed on top of this affective program and allows us to reflect on affective signals and even to ignore them to some extent. Yet this is not to say that cognition has replaced affective experience. Without affective information we are conatively blind as Damasio (1994) has showed in his studies of brain injuries. Hence without affective information we will also be unable to appraise the quality of our life.

3.2 Empirical support

Social comparison is at best one piece of information in appraisals of happiness and it is an empirical question how much it matters. We can see how much when considering some implications of the theory.

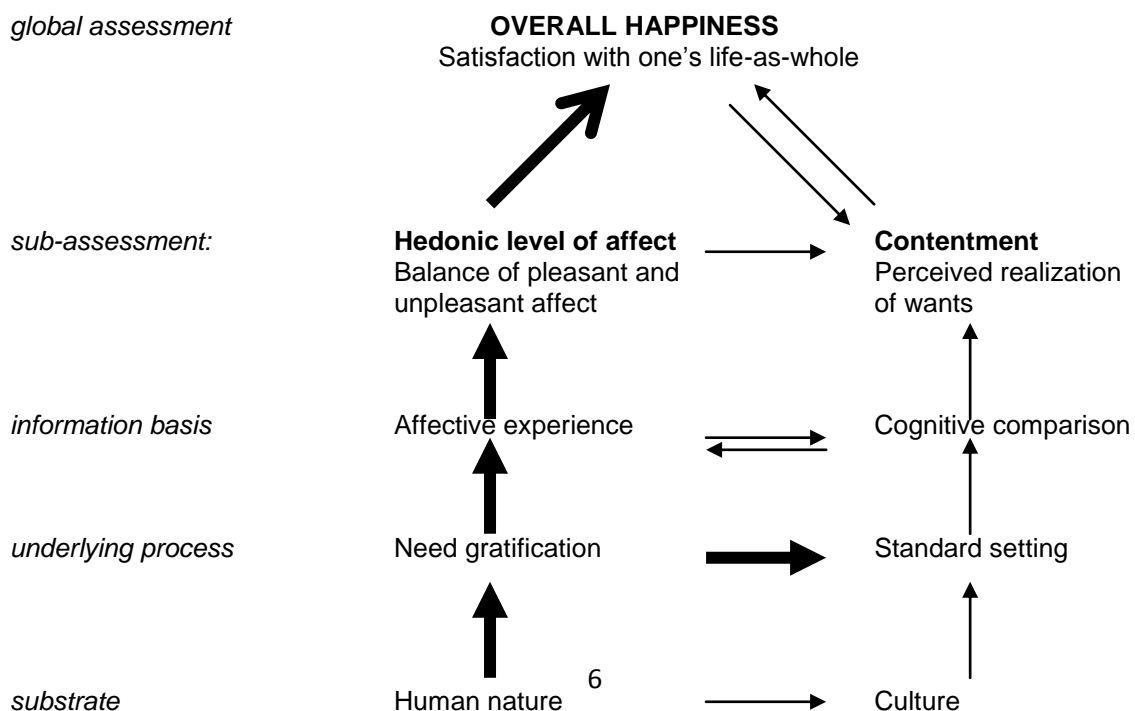
One testable implication of social comparison theory is that people will typically be neither positive nor negative about their life. If we feel good because we do better than the Jones, the Jones must feel bad because they do not so well. This must manifest in an average around neutral in general population samples. Yet survey data do not support this prediction, average happiness being far above neutral in modern nations.

Another implication is that happiness must be higher among people who do well on socially valued standards. This is not always the case however. Though people in high status jobs are typically happier than people in low status occupations, there is no correlation between happiness and level of education. Likewise, there is only modest correlation between happiness and income and this correlation is at least partly due to an effect of the former on the latter, happiness adding to earning chances.

4 Cognition and affect in the evaluation of life

In an earlier paper I have summarized the above theoretical views in a flow chart and indicated the empirical support with thick and thin arrows (Veenhoven 2009). The cognitive view that dominates in sociology is depicted in the thin path at the right and the affective view that roots in need theory in the thick path at the left. This means that sociologists take the side path for the main road.

How we assess how happy we are: a summary scheme



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