HAPPINESS

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1   DEFINITION

The degree to which a person evaluates the overall quality of his/her own life as a whole positively. In other words, how much one likes the life one lives.

2   SYNONYMS

Affect balance; Contentment; Enjoyment of life; Life satisfaction; Sum of pleasures and pains; Well-being, subjective

3   DESCRIPTION

3.1   Concept of 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 "well-being" and denotes both individual and social welfare. The word is also used in the more specific meaning of "a subjective enjoyment of life," and it is on this meaning we will concentrate in this lemma.

Happiness is defined 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. This definition is explained in more detail in Veenhoven 1984:22. This definition forms the basis of Veenhoven's World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012).

Components of Happiness
When assessing how much we like the life we live, we draw on two sources of information: how well we feel most of the time and to what extent we are getting what we want from life. These subappraisals are referred to as "components" of happiness, respectively, an affective component called *hedonic level of affect* and a cognitive component called *contentment.* These components are discussed in separate lemmas in this encyclopedia.

Scientific Literature on Happiness
There is a large body of philosophical literature on the good life in which happiness in this sense is sometimes addressed, though seldom systematically analyzed and certainly never researched empirically.

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Empirical research on happiness emerged in the twentieth century, the first study dating from 1911. All the research reports are listed in the Bibliography of the World Database of Happiness, which listed 7,000 publications at the start of 2012 (Veenhoven, 2012a). The findings of empirical research on this kind of happiness are gathered in the finding collections of the database; next to collections of distributional findings (Veenhoven, 2012c, 2012d) is a large collection of correlational findings (Veenhoven, 2012e).

Happiness,
Fig. 1 Happiness in Germany
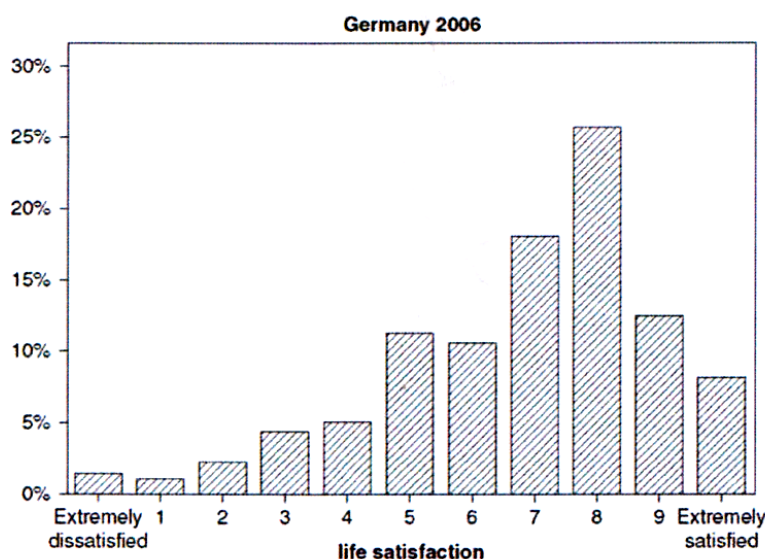
3.2 Measurement of Happiness

Since happiness is defined as something we have in mind, it can be measured using questions. An overview of questions used to measure happiness is available in the collection "Measures of Happiness" of the World Database of Happiness; to date, it includes about 900 variants (Veenhoven, 2012b). Measurement issues are discussed in more detail in the lemma "Happiness Measures" of this encyclopedia.

A commonly used question on happiness is as follows: "Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please answer by ticking a number between 1 (dissatisfied) and 10 (satisfied)." This question has figured in many survey studies all over the world, and it has been answered by more than a million people.

3.3 Happiness in Nations

An example of responses to the above question asked in Germany is given in Fig. 1. Responses differ widely across nations. In 2010, the *average* score on this 0-10 scale was 8.3 in Denmark but only 2.8 in Togo. Most of these differences can be explained by variation in societal characteristics, such as economic development, rule of law, and trust in people. People clearly live happiest in the most modern nations in today's world. Ongoing modernization is coupled with a gradual rise in average happiness in most nations.

There are also differences in *dispersion* of happiness in nations. In 2010, the standard deviation on this 0-10 scale was 1,4 in the Netherlands and 3.2 in Angola.

These differences are also linked to societal development. Inequality of happiness tends to be lower in modern nations and has declined in these nations since the 1970s.

Scores on level and dispersion of happiness in nations can be combined to obtain an index of *Inequality Adjusted Happiness,* which is described in a separate lemma in this encyclopedia. Scores on average happiness in nations can also be combined with estimates of longevity to obtain an index of *Happy Life Years (HLY),* which is also described in a separate lemma.

Data on all these indicators are available in the collection "Happiness in Nations" of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2012c).

3.4   Happiness in Publics

In addition to the data on happiness in the general population in nations, there is considerable data on happiness in specific populations, such as children, pensioners, medical patients, and criminals. These data are gathered in the collection of "Happiness in Publics" of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2012d).

Some illustrative findings are as follows: Happiness tends to be lowest around the middle of life. Married people are happier than singles, but couples with children are not happier than childless couples. Happiness is strongly related to personality, but unrelated to IQ. Religious people are happier than nonbelievers in most countries of the world, but not everywhere.

3.5   Correlates of Happiness

Numerous researchers all over the world have looked at differences in individual happiness within countries.

Social Position

Because most of the studies into individual differences in happiness have been inspired by egalitarian social policy, the emphasis is often on social differences, such as in income, education, and employment. Contrary to expectation, these positional differences have little bearing on happiness, at least not in modern affluent society. Together, positional variables explain, mostly, no more than 10 % of the variance in happiness. A summary of the main findings of these studies is given in Table 1.

Life Ability.

The strongest correlates of happiness are found at the psychological level; happy people are typically better endowed with capabilities than the unhappy. The common variance explained by such variables tends to be around 30 %. Some main findings are summarized in Scheme 6. Much of the findings on individual variation in happiness boil down to a difference in *ability to control one's environment*, and this pattern seems to be universal. An overview is presented in Table 2. people.

Table 1 Happiness and position in society: summary of research findings

	Strength of correlation within *western nations*	Similarity of correlation across *all nations*
Social rank		
Income	+	+
Education		+
Prestige	+	+
Social participation		
Employment	±	+
Memberships	+	+
Primary bonds		
Married	++	+
Children	0	?
Friends	+	+

++ = Strong positive	+ = Similar
+ = Positive	± = Varying
0 = No relation	- = Different
- = Negative	? = not yet investigated
? = Not yet investigated	

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of Correlational findings (Veenhoven. 2012e)

3.6 Causal Path

Having established that people differ in happiness, the next question is why. Various factors are involved: social institutions and individual behavior, simple sensory experiences and higher cognition, stable characteristics of the individual and his or her environment, as well as freaks of fate. A tentative ordering of factors and processes is presented in a sequence model in Table 3.

In this model, the assumption is made that the judgment of life draws on one's 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 onetime 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 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, and individual development.

Table 2 Happiness and lifeabilities: summary of research findings

	Strength of correlation within *western nations*	Similarity of correlation across *all nations*
Proficiencies		
Physical health	+	—
Mental health	++	—
IQ	0	+
Personality		
Internal control	+	+
K subversion	+	+
Conscientiousness	+	0
Art of living		
Lust acceptance	+	+
Sociability	++	+

++ = Strong positive   + = Similar
+ = Positive   ± = Varying
0 = No relation   - = Different
- = Negative   ? = not yet investigated

? = Not yet investigated

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection of Correlational Findings (Veenhoven, 2012e)

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 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).

3.7   Consequences of Happiness

Prophets of penitence say that happiness spoils, among other things, because unhappiness drives activity and creativity. Yet, empirical research typically shows positive effects of happiness, such as greater involvement in activities and better health.

Many of these findings are condensed in the "broaden-and-build theory" Fredrickson (2004). An overview of the literature on consequences of happiness is available in the Bibliographyof Happiness, Section Q (Veenhoven, 2012a).

Table 3 Evaluation of life: a sequence model of conditions and processes

Life-chances	Course of events	Flow of experience	Evaluation of life
Quality of society Economic welfare Social equality Political freedom Cultural lush Moral order Etc... *Social position* Material property Political influence Social prestige Family bonds Etc... *Individual abilities* Physical fitness Psychic fortitude Social capability Intellectual skill Etc...	*Confrontation with:* Deficit or affluence Attack or protection Solitude or company Humiliation or honor Routine or challenge Ugliness or beauty Etc...	*Experiences of :* Yearning or satiation Anxiety or safety loneliness or love Rejection or respect Dullness or excitement Repulsion or rapture Etc...	*Appraisal of average affect* Comparison with standards of the good life Striking an overall balance of life
Conditions for happiness			Appraisal process

3.8 Pursuit of Happiness

Much of the research on happiness is prompted by the hope of finding ways to promote greater happiness for a greater number of people; however, several theories about happiness imply that improving our living conditions will not make us any happier. 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. Another comforting finding is that average happiness in nations 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.

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