

INFORMED PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

What we should know, do we know and can we get to know?¹

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ABSTRACT

The rational pursuit of happiness requires knowledge of happiness and in particular answers to the following four questions: 1: Is greater happiness realistically possible? 2: If so, to what extent is that in our own hands? 3: How can we get happier? What things should be considered in the choices we make? 4: How does the pursuit of happiness fit with other things we value?

Answers to these questions are not only sought by individuals who want to improve their personal life, they are also on the mind of managers concerned about the happiness of members of their organization and of governments aiming to promote greater happiness of a greater number of citizens. All these actors might make more informed choices if they could draw on a sound base of research findings.

In this paper I take stock of the available findings and the answers these hold for the four types of questions asked by the three kinds of actors. I draw on data from different scientific disciplines gathered in the World Database of Happiness, which serves as an on-line supplement to this paper.

The data provide good answers to the questions 1 and 2, but fall short on the questions 3 and 4. Priorities for further research are indicated.

Keywords: happiness, life-satisfaction, subjective wellbeing, research synthesis, applied utilitarianism, state of the art

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published as EHERO white paper 2011/1 entitled 'Evidence-based pursuit of happiness'

1 CALL FOR GREATER HAPPINESS

All humans want a satisfying life for themselves and their children and this appears in high ranking of happiness in the value hierarchy of students all over the world (Diener 2004). Individually people seek ways to a more satisfying life and in Western societies this quest manifests in soaring sales of ‘how-to-be-happy books’, such as ‘The art of happiness’ by the Dalai Lama (1998). It also reflects in the development of life-coaching businesses.

Citizens in western societies also call on governments for improvement of required social conditions and 85% of the British agree with the statement that ‘a governments prime aim should be achieving the greatest happiness of the people, not the greatest wealth’ (BBC 2006, question 14). Consequently, interest in happiness is rising among policy makers. Happiness is a new topic on the political agenda, next to sustainability. A recent manifestation of this trend is the international conference on Happiness and Wellbeing held at the UN headquarters in New York in April 2012 (Thinley 2012), which was followed in June 2014 by a decision of the general assembly to celebrate an ‘International Day of Happiness’ on March 20th every year.

1.1 Ideological context

At first sight this interest in happiness is something quite new, but actually it is the revival of a long-standing creed. The idea that there is a moral obligation to advance human happiness is a fruit of the European ‘Enlightenment’, an intellectual movement that took a position against religious views that had dominated thinking in the European Middle Ages.

One of the contested views was that happiness can be found only in the afterlife and that an earthly life serves only as an entrance test to Heaven. The enlightened opinion was that happiness is possible on Earth and that we should not renounce it. Another contested view was that morality roots in divine revelation, and in particular in the ‘Ten Commandments’. Enlightened thinkers came to see morality more as a matter of human agreement, and discussed the intellectual foundations for social contracts.

Much of this thought is voiced by Jeremy Bentham (1789) in his famous book *On Morals and Legislation*, in which he argues that the good and bad of actions should be judged by their effects on human happiness. In his view, the best thing to do is that which results in the “greatest happiness, for the greatest number.” This moral creed is called ‘the greatest happiness principle’ and is also known as ‘utilitarianism’.

This secular ideology met with considerable resistance. In the 18th century the opposition came mainly from the churches, which were still quite powerful. In the 19th century the greatest happiness principle was met with reservations in the liberal and socialist emancipation movements that were more interested in freedom and equality than in happiness. In the early 20th century considerable opposition came from the then-virulent nationalism that laid more emphasis on the glory of the nation than on the happiness of its inhabitants. All these ideologies lost power in the late 20th century, and partly for this

reason² we have seen a revival of Bentham's greatest happiness principle.

Rising prosperity was another factor in this ideological shift. Pressing problems, such as poverty and illiteracy, were fairly well solved in western nations, and the removal of the 'negatives' gave room to 'positive' goals' on the political agenda. The recent emergence of 'happiness economics' is part of this long-term development.

Still criticism has not silenced, such as appears in a recent special of the Journal of Health, Culture and Society (Aubrecht 2013).

1.2 Need for facts

Calls for greater happiness are often accompanied by recommendations about the way to achieve that. At the individual level such advice typically involves 'alternative' ways of life, such as consuming less and meditating more, while at the political level greater happiness for a greater number is seen in social reform, such as less economic competition and more family life (e.g. Layard 2005).

Yet a rational pursuit of happiness should be based on established fact rather than on ideological belief. As such the pursuit of greater happiness is similar to the pursuit of better health. In the past we have learned a lot from empirical research on conditions for good health and, using that information, we live now longer than ever before in human history. Likewise, orienting on scientific knowledge about happiness will probably mean that we will also live happier long lives.

Happiness as life-satisfaction

Though it is widely agreed that we should reach out for greater happiness for a greater number, there is difference in the meaning attached to the term 'happiness'. Sometimes the word is associated with an ideal society and sometimes with a particular personality pattern, such as in the case of 'eudaimonic' happiness (Ryff & Singer 2008). Such mixings of means and ends should be avoided in the search for conducive conditions of happiness.

In this study I use a definition of happiness that is free of any prepossession about its causes. I define happiness as *the subjective enjoyment of one's own life as a whole*, in other words, how much one likes the life one lives. I have delineated that concept in more detail in the inaugural issue of this journal (Veenhoven 2000). This definition fits the meaning in common language and is also the kind of happiness that Jeremy Bentham wrote about.

Research findings on happiness

Thus defined, happiness is something on our mind and can as such be measured using questioning. The first questionnaire study on happiness dates from 1915 (Webb 1915) and since some 4000 more investigations have been performed. Findings yielded by these investigations are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013)

² Interest in happiness is also fuelled by social counter movements that reverse 'alternative' ways of life and social organization, such as 19th century romanticism that projected happiness in pastoral life and 20th century New Age that sees happiness in exotic spirituality. In this tradition, the word 'happiness' is used for rhetorical purposes in the first place and denotes something missing in current life but available in the advocated life. Since the way to greater happiness is already given in this line of thought, there is little interest in empirical research on that matter.

The World Database of Happiness is a *findings archive* that consists of several *collections*. The database builds on a collection of all scientific publications about happiness, called the ‘Bibliography of Happiness’ (Veenhoven 2013a). To date this collection includes some 8000 books and articles, of which half report an empirical investigation in which an acceptable measure of happiness has been used. Indicators that fit the concept of happiness, as defined above, are listed in the collection ‘Measures of Happiness’ (Veenhoven 2013b).

The findings yielded by studies that pass this test for adequate measurement of happiness are described on separate ‘finding pages’, using a standard format and terminology. Two kinds of findings are discerned: *distributional findings* on how happy people are at a particular time and place and *correlational findings* about the things that go together with more or less happiness in these populations.

To date, the database contains about 9000 distributional findings, of which 6000 on happiness in the general population of nations (Veenhoven 2013c) and 3000 on happiness in particular social categories, such as students or psychiatric patients (Veenhoven 2013d).

The collection ‘Correlational Findings’ (Veenhoven 2013e) contains some 15.000 research results. These findings are sorted on subject and the collection can also be searched on characteristics of the population investigated, i.e. public, place, time, and on methodological features such as sampling and measurement. Though far from complete³, this is the best available source on conditions for happiness at present.

The World Database of Happiness is based at Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Netherlands. The database is free available on internet:

<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>. Copies are stored in the university library.

1.3 Plan of this paper

In this paper I consider first what we *should* know about happiness if we want to advance it systematically. Next I take stock of what we *do* know at this moment, using the above mentioned World Database of Happiness. On that basis I will finally examine what we *do not* know yet and mark some things we *can* get to know.

Discussion of *whether* we should aim at greater happiness is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus is here on *how* to achieve that in a rational way.

1.4 Format of the review

Reviews of research typically provide references to many publications on the subject and discuss research findings in some detail, often specifying methods and outcomes in lengthy tables. That format is workable up to some hundred findings, but becomes impracticable when more is available, such as in this case with more than 20.000 research findings.

In this paper I introduce a new format that takes advantage of the on-line availability of detailed information in a findings archive and of the change from texts printed on paper to electronic files, in which links can be inserted. In this text the reader will see fewer references

³ To date (March 2014) the collection of distributional findings in nations is almost complete. The collection of correlational findings is fairly complete up to the year 2000, but a lot of findings published since are still waiting to be entered.

than usual in academic review papers, but a lot of links to sections in the World Database of Happiness, which serves as an on-line supplement. This allows me to make statements about main trends in the data without burdening the reader with detail, while remaining controllable.

This way of summarizing research findings has several advantages over the traditional reviews that are limited to the possibilities of printed paper as the information carrier. Checking with the available data is easier now that links in this text lead the reader directly to standardized descriptions of the research findings, all of which still contain a traditional reference to the original research report. Referencing is also more complete; traditional reviews must often cite selectively, since they cannot mention all the available data sources on the pages available. This method allows that all relevant research reports are taken into account and thus avoids the danger of ‘cherry picking’. This new method also allows a more complete description of the findings. While traditional reviews typically condense the information in a few columns of a summary table, this method allows easy access to much more detail in on-line ‘finding pages’.

An additional advantage of using the World Database of Happiness as the source for this review is its conceptual specificity. As noted in section 1.2 this archive restricts to research findings obtained with measures of happiness that fit the concept of happiness as life-satisfaction. As such this source is more informative than literature databases in which words denote different meanings.

This format may strike the reader as unfamiliar, but it is likely to become more common in the future. Both the growing stream of data and their electronic availability press for innovations in research reviewing.

2 WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HAPPINESS

Informed pursuit of happiness requires answers to the following four basic questions:

- Is more happiness a realistic possibility? If we have reached the maximum already, there is no point in striving for more.
- To what extent do we control our happiness? If happiness appears to be a matter of fate, there is no point in pursuing it.
- How can we get happier? This question presents typically when we are faced with having to make major choices.
- How well will the pursuit of happiness fit with other things we value? We typically aim at more things than just happiness and look for an optimal balance.

Below I will consider these information requirements on three levels: 1) the micro-level of individuals, 2) the meso-level of organizations and 3) the macro-level of nations. The questions and levels are depicted in [scheme 1](#).

2.1 What individuals should know about happiness

Many of us would like to become happier than we are. In this context we are faced with the above questions of whether such a goal is realistically possible, and if so, to what extent achieving this is in our own hands. How can greater happiness be achieved and how well does the pursuit of greater happiness fit with other things we value?

2.1.1 Could one be happier?

This is not as evident as it seems at first sight, several scholars argue that a lasting rise in happiness is not possible and that we can, at best, achieve temporally uplifts. One of the arguments is that our happiness is bound to a ‘set-point’ based in genetic disposition and early experience (e.g. Lykken 1999). Another claim holds that happiness depends on comparison and that standards rise when we get happier. In that view the pursuit of happiness puts us on a ‘hedonic treadmill’, on which we do not advance (Brickman & Campbell 1971). The first thing one would like to know is whether these experts are right.

If these experts are wrong (as we will see they are, in section 3.1), the next question is what are the chances of more happiness for one personally. Your chances for greater happiness in the future depend obviously on how happy you are in the present; if you are very happy already there is less to gain than if you start out miserable.

Another thing worth knowing is how happy comparable people are, that is, compatriots with a similar age, level of health and personality. If these people are happier

than you are, a similar level is probably also within your reach. If comparable people are typically less happy than you are, you may be at your maximum.

Such guesstimates require that you know how happy you are yourself. It also requires an overview of the happiness of the people with whom you compare yourself, and if such data is available, you would want to know whether you can trust them, since some expert say that self reports of happiness are biased in several ways, for instance, that people present themselves as happier than they really are⁴.

2.1.2 How much can you do about it?

If greater happiness is apparently feasible for people like you, the next question is whether you can do much about increasing your happiness. Were these comparable people just luckier than you were, or did they deal better with life? To what extent are you the ‘smith of your own happiness’? In that context it is worth knowing what part of the differences in happiness is due to genetic endowment and strokes of luck and what part depends on things that are in your control.

2.1.3 What to choose?

If greater happiness seems to be in your hands, the next question is: What to do? This question arises not only when you plan your life, but typically when you are faced with choices. We are faced with many choices in our private lives, next to the many minor daily choices, such as what to eat for dinner; we also have to make major life-choices, such as having children and accepting a job abroad.

Limitations to information

Deciding such major choices is inevitably based on assumptions about future happiness and these assumptions are often wrong. As a result we often ‘miss-predict’ our future happiness. For example: a person may accept a better paying job at a longer distance from home, expecting that the higher pay will buy more happiness, but end up less happy because of an unforeseen loss of happiness due to the longer time spent commuting (Stutzer & Frey 2008).

This type of information deficit is the subject of a new strand of research in economics. In his ‘Stumbling on Happiness’ Daniel Gilbert (2006) reviews several of the cognitive mechanisms involved, such as our tendency to predict future happiness on the basis of what we remember we have enjoyed in the past. We also have to deal cultural sources of misinformation, such as faulty folk wisdom and misleading advertising.

Put into the words of economists, the happiness we anticipate when making a choice is *expected utility* (or decision utility), and the happiness we feel later as a consequence of this choice is *experienced utility*. The observed discrepancy illustrates the limitations of the assumption that Homo Economicus is fully informed about his or her preferences (Kahneman & Thaler 2006).

⁴ An overview of the literature about possible distortions in responses to questions about happiness is available in the [Bibliography of Happiness](#) (Veenhoven 2013a), section ‘Measurability of happiness’, subject code Ca.

Steps to informed choice

In this view a lot of happiness can be gained (utility optimized) if we are better informed about the consequences of our choices. What information do we need? A first thing to know is how such choices tend to work out for the happiness of most people, second thing is how such choices have worked out for people like you and a third thing is how it does work out for your own happiness once you have made that choice.

Consider the example of choosing an occupation. If you consider becoming a lawyer, it is worth knowing how happy lawyers generally are. If they are less happy than average, as some studies suggest (Seligman et al. 2005), you would want to know whether this is an effect of the kind of work they do, or that the occupation attracts unhappy people, who possibly get even happier digging around in conflicts. A next thing you would like to know is how that has worked out for people like you. How about the happiness of lawyers with a similar personality? How many of them are happy and how many did get more or less happy over the years they are in the profession?

When you have gone into law you can still decide to quit and in that context you would like to know whether being a lawyer has made you any happier. Since memory can be imprecise, this calls for systematic monitoring of your happiness. In that phase comparison with comparable people is also welcome for another reason. We typically get somewhat less happy between age 30 to 50⁵ and for estimating the effect of your work as a lawyer you should take this into account. So the question is then whether your loss of happiness is greater than that of comparable people who have taken a different path after school and went on to become medical doctors or teachers.

This point can also be illustrated with the analogy of how a doctor chooses the right medicine for a patient. Step one in evidence based medicine is to assess whether a medicine works for most patients and this is typically examined in large scale trials. Step two is to assess the effectiveness of the medication among particular kinds of patients, such as males and females, and increasingly in patients with a similar genetic profile. Since the effectiveness of a specific medication for a specific patient is still unsure, the doctor will monitor the patient's reactions to the medication and stop the treatment if it does not work or has side effects that are too bad. This requires systematic monitoring of patients and their reactions need to be compared with those of similar patients given the same medication for the same reason, i.e. a specific type of pain killer for a specific type of pain.

Common subjects of choice

Certain common questions arise in a number of spheres of life. Below I consider some illustrative cases.

Family: Almost all of us start our lives living in a family and, when grown up, we are faced with choices as how to live after that. Live alone or together, have children or not, keep close to one's family of origin or cut ties to the past, etc. Sometimes such things more or less happen to us, but increasingly they are becoming a matter of deliberate choice. This is for instance often the case with respect to having children or not. I will use that case as an

⁵ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Age](#), A4.2 Age in years

example for this category of decisions.

In the past children were an inevitable and sometimes unwelcome byproduct of sex, but today planned parenthood is possible and a decision to stop contraception is required if one wants to have a child. As a result many couples brood over whether or not to have children, and if so, when to have them. This decision process can take years and sometimes a conclusion is not reached (e.g. VanLuyn 1996).

What would these people want to know? First, will having children add to their happiness or not? Then, will a second and or a third child add or subtract from their happiness? What is the optimal work-life arrangement for such people? Since they cannot look into the future, they must find their answers by looking at the experiences of comparable people who made the decision to have, or not have, children in the past. So it is worth knowing the percentage of like people who became less happy after the birth of their first child, the percentage that remained equally happy, and the percentage for whom having children made them happier than they were before.

Career: Most of us have to choose how to make for a living. In deciding on an occupation we will want to know how much we will earn and how happy we will be in that job. We are mostly better informed about the former than about the latter. We can make a more educated guess about how happy we will be in this work when we have information about the average happiness of people currently working in that job.

Once we have chosen what type of work we want to do, we can also choose how much we work we want to do and that begs the question of whether we will be happier in a part-time job than in full-time work. At the end of our working life we are faced with the choice of when to stop working and at that stage we would like to know how well those who have taken early pension are doing against those who continued working until the mandatory age of retirement.

Likewise, it is worth knowing whether your working conditions will make a difference, such as being an independent entrepreneur or in paid employment and working in a large company or a small organization. When making these choices, it is also helpful to know how such choices have worked out for other people, in particular for people like you.

Still another choice is whether to go for job advancement or not, and in this context it is worth knowing whether the chances for happiness are better on the upper rungs of the social ladder. Are successful people typically happier? Does occupational success buy happiness for people like you?

Consumption: We spent a lot of money during our life time, next to expenses for daily necessities a lot of money is spent on big purchases, such as on a house. Expectation about happiness also figures in such choices, for instance, people who take on a heavy mortgage to buy a big house, mostly expect that life will be more satisfying in a big house than in a small one. In this context it is worth knowing whether people living in big houses are indeed happier than those living in cramped housing and how the size of your house will reflect on your happiness in the different phases of your life.

For the same reason it is worth knowing whether spending patterns make a difference to one's happiness. Are people who spend relatively large amounts on experiences, such as

holidays and theater, typically happier than otherwise comparable people who would rather invest their money in property and savings?

Such information about the real long-term effects on happiness is particularly needed as an antidote to the many suggestions made in advertising.

Personal development: How happy we are depends partly on our life-ability, that is, on the skills we have to make the most of our situation. Several of these abilities can be improved to some extent. One way of strengthening one's skills is to expose oneself to challenging experiences, such as in demanding work, tough sports or tricky love affairs. Alongside this 'school of life', one can also seek professional guidance and visit a life-coach or take a course in personality development.

In the latter cases market information would be welcome. What trainings are available? How about their effectiveness? Is there any evidence for how such interventions have worked out on the happiness for people like you?

2.1.4 How compatible with other goals?

Though most people will aim to obtain greater happiness, few people aim exclusive at maximizing their own happiness. We typically have more goals in mind and look for an optimal combination of these, for instance we may want to know how to lead a life that is both satisfying and meaningful.

In this context two questions arise: one question regarding whether the *means* to achieve greater happiness fit the means required to realize other goals. A second question is how well happiness *as such* goes together with other values one endorses. An example of the first question is to what extent boosting one's happiness by buying a second home in a far away country will interfere with one's preferences for sustainable development of the world and maintaining close ties with one's family. An example of the second question is how will being more happy affect your functioning? Will it make you self-sufficient and uncritical as some critics of hedonism suggest (e.g. Huxley 1932), or will it boost your social involvement and responsibility as claimed in positive psychology (e.g. Fredrickson 2004)? What about people who have given up personal happiness for a good cause, such as running an orphanage for war children: Has their loss in happiness interfered with the realization of other goals, such as being a good spouse and parent?

In both cases the question is whether there is synergy (trade on) between happiness and other aims or conflict (trade off). Such estimates are uncertain of course. Still it is better to consider them than to neglect them. It is mostly also better to choose one's course in life on, even incomplete, information, than based on the half truths thrown at us by advertising and folk wisdom.

2.2 What organizations should know about happiness

Happiness is also an issue for organizations, such as business companies, government bodies, schools and hospitals. Happiness is typically not a primary aim of organizations; for example,

business corporations will aim at profit in the first place, while the police aims to maintain law and order. Still, the happiness of employees and clients can often be instrumental in fulfilling these chief tasks and happiness is sometimes even set out as a secondary goal in mission statements.

Happiness is a more prominent a goal in many educational organizations. Schools often claim that they prepare not only for the labor market, but also for a good life. Happiness is a main aim of care-homes; the product of care-homes for elderly people being typically to add a few not too unhappy years to their life. Below I will expand on the latter case as an example⁶.

2.2.1 Could your people be happier?

One of the first things managers of care-homes should know is how happy their clients and staff members are. This requires systematic observation, via for example, a periodical satisfaction survey. In the case of clients, their ratings of happiness should be combined with data on their longevity, so that the performance of the care-home can be expressed in happy life years realized since entrance.

The next question is then whether the added life years figures could be better, for instance, whether an average of five happy life-years is realistically possible among clients who entered the care home in the advanced stage of dementia. Answering of this question requires comparable data, to be obtained from comparable institutions and also from alternative settings where care is provided for comparable people.

2.2.2 Can your organization do much about improving happiness?

If such data, as in the above example, do show higher average happiness in comparable organizations, the next question is whether you could make your people any happier if you wanted to do so. In this context it is worth knowing to what extent the difference is in selection: Did you happen to get relatively unhappy clients in your care home? Another thing worth knowing is what share of the variance in the happiness of your clients is due to organizational conditions that you can change.

2.2.3 How can you make your people happier?

Conditions that promote happiness are evidently different across organizations and the effects will not be the same way for everyone. Still a manager aiming at greater happiness would like to know whether there are general tendencies.

Continuing on the example of care-homes for the elderly, a common question is how much care is optimal. Too little care will obviously hurt, but too much of it can result in hospitalization and bring clients from the frying pan into the fire (Becker 2006). In this context it is worth knowing how different care regimes have worked out for the happiness and longevity of different kinds of clients. Answering this question requires systematic

⁶ Literature on happiness in care homes is gathered in the [Bibliography of Happiness](#) (Veenhoven 2013a), subject section 'Institutional living', code Hf03.02

monitoring of many clients in many care homes.

Likewise, managers in work organizations would like to know how much employee autonomy is optimal from a happiness perspective, or better, how optimal autonomy differs across jobs and people. In that context they would like to see how things have worked out in comparable organizations.

Happiness is often associated with non-work aspects of ‘work’, such as company celebrations, nice buildings and days off. Managers would like to know what happiness revenues such provisions actually garner.

2.2.4 How compatible is happiness promotion with other goals of your organization?

As happiness is not the prime aim of most organizations, questions arise about the match of pursuing happiness with more prominent organizational objectives. One question is to what extent the means required for greater happiness match with these other aims. Another question is how greater happiness, when it is realized, will work out for other organizational objectives.

Cost-efficiency is one of the main objectives in most organizations, be it for profit or for the sake of other causes. So the question arises of what the money costs of promoting greater happiness are. If greater happiness of employees is achieved with more days off and a bottle of wine at lunch, there is obviously a conflict. Yet there can also be win-win situations, such as in the above mentioned case of the old age home, where saving on care resulted in greater happiness (Becker 2006).

There are also questions about how greater happiness, when achieved, will work out for the other goals of an organization. In business organizations such a question is whether happy workers will be more productive, and to what extent happy clients will pay more. For hospitals the main question is whether happy patients recover better and for schools it is whether happy students achieve more.

There are probably no general answers to these questions, effects on and of happiness being contingent to persons and situations. This calls again for information about how things have worked out in specific situations under specific conditions in the past.

2.3 What governments should know about happiness

Happiness is also an issue at the macro level of societies, the more so where societies have developed into states in which governments engage in social engineering. As in the case for organizations, greater happiness is typically not a prime concern of state administrations. Still happiness is rising up on the political agenda and this begs the question of what governments should know if they want to bring about greater happiness for a greater number of citizens.

2.3.1 Is greater happiness in the country possible?

Governments will hear some experts say that pursuit of greater happiness for a greater number is pointless. Alongside the arguments as to why greater happiness will not be possible for individuals (cf. 2.1.1), it is also argued that greater average happiness in nation is

a mirage. A common argument is that happiness depends on comparison with compatriots, and that relative differences do not change when absolute conditions improve for everybody in the country (e.g. Brickman & Campbell 1971). The 'Easterlin paradox' (Easterlin 1974) is often explained in this way. Next there is the theory that happiness depends very much on 'national character' rooted in historical conditions, such as the many revolutions in France, which have created a cynical view on life, as Inglehart (1990: 30) suggests. A first thing governments need to know is whether average happiness in nations is really immutable.

Once it is clear that average happiness in nations can change; the next step is to estimate the chances for creating greater happiness in one's own country. This requires a view on how happy people currently are in the country, which calls for survey studies. The following step is comparison, both comparisons of present day happiness with happiness in earlier times in one's country and with happiness in other countries. Governments can then see how their country is doing happiness wise on a range between the highest and lowest levels ever observed in nations.

Since most governments are also concerned about equality among their citizens, they are also interested in dispersion of happiness in their country and how that compares to inequality of happiness in other nations.

2.3.2 Can governments do much about the happiness of citizens?

If the level of happiness in a country lags behind the possible level, the next question is whether a government can change that situation for the better. In this context a first question is to what extent the differences in happiness are in things that are beyond the control of governments, such as a prevalence of unhappy genes in the population, poor climatic conditions or historical legacies.

If the level of happiness in a country appears to depend on things that can be changed, the next question is whether a government can bring about that change. This is the question of limits to social engineering. In this context it is worth knowing how other governments have fared in their attempts to improve happiness in their countries: Have they made any difference or have attempts to create a better society mostly resulted in the opposite as critics of utopian engineering suggest (e.g. Avery 2000)?

2.3.3 What can governments do to foster happiness?

If a government decides to pursue greater happiness in their country, next question is where to start. In this context a government typically wants to know whether there are pockets of unhappiness in their countries, or actually, whether there is any truth in the claims about unhappiness in particular categories of citizens advanced by organized advocacy.

Taking a broader view, governments would like to know what the drivers of differences in happiness among citizens are: in particular to what extent these correspond with things over which a government has some control, such as income, schooling, health care and safety. Again this typically involves the sifting of competing claims of special interests presented by lobbyists. Interior struggles also call for information about winners and losers of particular policies, for example, whether emancipation of women will come at the expense of the happiness of men and children.

In an even wider perspective, which some governments take, questions about societal conditions for happiness arise. What is the secret of the happiest countries, such as Denmark? Is it in institutional things such as a strong welfare state? Is it in the political regime, such as interest groups having much voice? Or is it in particular policies, such as promotion of equal rights for men and women? What is the role of the well-being professions, such as psychologists and life-coaches?

2.3.4 How compatible with other policy aims?

As in the case of organizations, happiness is only one of the aims states pursue and typically not a very prominent one. This begs the question of how well the pursuit of greater happiness fits major policy aims, such as economic competitiveness, political democracy and social peace.

In this context one question is to what extent the things required for greater happiness will also add to these causes, such as schooling adding both to happiness and economic growth. Or, how the question is put most of the time, to what extent the things governments do anyway for other causes, will also add to happiness.

Once more a further question is what will be the consequences of greater happiness: Will it foster decadence and decay, as some prophets of doom predict, like Huxley (1932), who depicted happy citizens as short-sighted consumption slaves. Or will a happy populace rather be more productive, democratic and peace minded as is now commonly assumed in positive psychology? These contradictory speculations call for empirical assessment.

3 WHAT WE DO KNOW ABOUT HAPPINESS

The current body of knowledge on happiness contains answers to some of the questions raised in section 2, but not to all. The data fall short on most questions and are missing entirely for some of them. An overview of data availability is presented in [scheme 2](#), the richer the information, the darker the color of the cells and blank cells indicate a lack of any data.

Below I will hark back to the questions discussed in section 2 and consider what the available research findings tell about the answers. As announced in section 1.4 I provide links to relevant sections of the World Database of Happiness in which the findings are described in much detail. The links lead to on-line ‘findings reports’, the find place in which is indicated with a subject code and name.

3.1 Information base for private choice

Most of the available research findings concern the micro level of individuals and provide information about how happy people typically are, how much they differ in happiness from each other and what things go together with more or less happiness. The bulk of this research is cross-sectional, which often leaves us with ‘chicken or egg’ questions. There is also a growing number of longitudinal studies that provide indications about the direction of causality⁷. Most of the data come from studies in western countries, but the available findings from other part of the world tend to be similar (Veenhoven 2010a). What answers do these findings provide to the questions mentioned in section 2.1?

3.1.1 Could one be happier?

Is the pursuit of greater happiness illusory as the claims of ‘set-point’ and ‘hedonic treadmill’ suggest? The data tell another story; follow-up studies show considerable changes in the happiness of individuals over time, in particular in the long term⁸. Change is linked to things that happen in people’s lives, for instance, most people get happier when they find a spouse and become less happy if that spouse dies. A lot of people get happier and a lot become less happy over time. Happiness tends to rise in the third stage of life and to drop in one’s final years before death⁹. So happiness can apparently change.

How happy do people say they currently are? Survey studies show considerable differences in responses varying from ‘extremely unhappy’ (0) to ‘extremely happy’ (10). The distribution of responses in Germany is presented in [scheme 3](#). In this case about 7% of the respondents say they are ‘extremely happy’ (rating 10) and these people are unlikely to become substantially happier, rather some loss of happiness is to be expected. Yet all the other respondents rate themselves below the maximum and could improve their happiness, at

⁷ World Database of Happiness, [Bibliography](#), Aj02.01 Follow-up studies

⁸ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Change in Happiness](#), H5.2.2 Actual changes in happiness

⁹ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Age](#). A4.2 Age in years

least in theory. In practice the chances for greater happiness are constrained by genetic and situational factors. Not everybody can get to a 10. So the question is whether greater happiness is possible for a person like you.

One clue then is, how happy one has been in the past, if one has been happier before, greater happiness in the future is at least in one's repertoire. Retrospective studies show such cases, although most people think that they are having the best time of their life now¹⁰. However, recollections of earlier happiness are not very accurate and less so, the longer in the past. A better alternative is to make repeated assessment of one's happiness over the years, and this can now be done using happiness-tracking tools, such as the Happiness Indicator¹¹.

Another indication of one's possible happiness level is found by comparing oneself with similar people, if these are happier than you are, there is a good chance that you can also get happier. Data for such comparisons are available from survey studies and are being used in some self-help websites. Comparison is mostly limited to people of the same age, sex and education. A more refined comparison is possible using the above mentioned Happiness Indicator website, on which visitors enter more information, about such things as their health, habits and personality¹².

This all provides no definite answer, but allows an educated guess.

3.1.2 How much can we do about?

Set point theory has a point in that happiness depends, at least partly, on genetic endowment; babies born with a healthy body and an extraverted disposition have a better prospect of leading a happy life. In this respect happiness is comparable to health, which is also largely determined by physical make-up and only partly by health behavior.

How much of the differences in happiness as shown in [scheme 3](#) can be attributed to genetics? Studies among twins suggest some 30%¹³. Such percentages are observed in rich nations, where external living conditions are good and difference in happiness therefore is more dependent on internal life-abilities. The share of heritability is probably lower in developing nations, where happiness depends more on more variable strokes of luck.

Mere good or bad luck will also determine happiness in developed nations, where people are still vulnerable to misfortunes, such as illness, unemployment and bereavement. The course of life-events depends to some extent on ourselves; some people get in trouble repeatedly, while others seem to enforce fate. Headey and Wearing (1992) have separated these effects using a panel study in which happiness, life events and personality were followed over time. They estimated that about 15% of the differences in happiness among Australians are due to blind luck.

Together this explains about half of the differences in happiness and there are claims that we are the smith of the other half. Lyubomirsky (2008) even speaks of 60% of our

¹⁰ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness Career](#), H5.1.1 Retrospective happiness

¹¹ <http://www.happinessindicator.com> The HappinessIndicator is a joint project of Erasmus University and VGZ health insurance company. The original Dutch version is available at <http://www.gelukswijzer.nl>

¹² These self reports are strictly confidential.

¹³ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Happiness of Siblings](#), F1.6.2.4 Happiness of siblings

happiness being in our control. This seems to be too optimistic to me, since we are dealing with unexplained variance.

Still there is good evidence that happiness depends on various capabilities we can willfully develop and that people who take active control of their lives are systematically happier than those who do not¹⁴. It is at least plausible that happiness also depends on the adequacy of choices made in life, in particular in modern multiple choice societies. Due to a lack of data on this I can only make a guess as to how much of the variance in our happiness is really in our own hands. My guesstimates are presented in [scheme 4](#).

3.1.3 What to choose?

Informed choice requires that we know a) how things generally work out for the happiness of people in general, b) how they have worked out for the happiness of people like us, and c) how the choice is currently working out for our own happiness (cf. section 2.1.1). What do we know about these things?

A lot of research has been done on conditions for happiness of people in general. Most of this research is cross-sectional and leaves us with chicken or egg questions, but there is also a growing body of evidence on things that have a causal effect on happiness. Some examples will be presented below.

There is also some information about conditions for happiness in particular categories, such as males and females, young and old, psychiatric patients, adolescents and university students¹⁵. Specifications by personality and preferences are scarce as yet, specifications by genetic profile non-existent. Split-ups are typically limited by sample size and as a result our current knowledge provides no real answers to the question of how a particular choice has worked out for the happiness of people like us.

Evidently, the research literature does not give an answer to how the choices you have made are currently working out for your personal happiness. However, tools have been developed that can be used to track your happiness and compare it with that of comparable people¹⁶.

I will now review some of the data on the happiness of people in general that are relevant for individual choice. I follow the domains of choice discussed in section 2.1.1. In each case I summarize the results in a table, in which data availability is again indicated by shaded cells and the direction of association by + or – signs. Detail about these summary markers is in the appendix of this paper. The columns ‘on particular kinds of people’ contain only indications of data availability, since all the variations cannot be summarized in one cell. Links to detail about the findings are presented in the right column of these tables instead of in footnotes.

Family

¹⁴ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on happiness and Personality](#), P4.3 Active and P4.58 inner control

¹⁵ World Database of Happiness, [Happiness in Publics](#)

¹⁶ ¹⁶ <http://www.happinessindicator.com> The HappinessIndicator is a joint project of Erasmus University and VGZ health insurance company. The original Dutch version is available at <http://www.gelukswijzer.nl>

A major choice in life is whether to seek the company of a spouse or to live alone. An attendant choice is whether to have children or not. Some research findings on the consequences for happiness are presented in [scheme 5](#).

Marry? There is much publicity about the joys of singlehood, but research findings show positive effects on happiness for matrimony. Married people tend to be happier, even if one takes into account that people who have an advantaged background have better marriage chances. Follow-up studies show that marriage boost happiness, though much of the gain melts away over the years. Still no marriage appears to be better than a bad marriage and divorcees become somewhat less unhappy once they are divorced relative to how happy they were before. Remarriage is typically followed by a rise in happiness. Men seem to benefit somewhat more from marriage than women do. Though marriage is a mixed blessing, research has not yet identified categories in which the disadvantages prevail. Even neurotics appear to be happier living in a relationship than alone (Schalkx & Bergsma 2008).

Children? Mass media typically depict the joys of parenthood, but research findings are less positive. Childless couples appear to be somewhat happier than couples with children and follow-up studies show a causal effect. Though the birth of the first child is attended with a peak, happiness declines soon after and recovers only when the last child leaves home. Yet there is considerable variation: the dip is deepest for young parents and highly educated mothers. Low educated full-time mothers tend to become happier, as do late parents. There are indications of positive effects on the longer term, very old people with children appeared to be somewhat happier than elderly without and the presence of children seems to add at least to the happiness of grandparents.

Work

Working life also involves several big choices, such as how much one will work, in what profession and in what conditions. Some food for informed choice is presented in [scheme 6](#).

Work or not? The prime choice is to whether engage in paid work at all. This choice presents itself typically to women, when they become a mother and also to those people who cannot cope well with the demands of work.

Research on the happiness of working mothers is inconclusive; some studies find them slightly happier than home mothers are and other studies find them slightly less so. This pattern appears in cross-sectional studies and in longitudinal ones. Apparently, the balance of advantages and disadvantages differs across persons and situations and these contingencies are not yet known.

Research on the effect of unemployment is more conclusive at first sight. Unemployed people are less happy than the employed, even when their lower income is taken into account. Follow-up studies show a drop in happiness when people fall unemployed and a rise of their happiness when they become re-employed. Still recovery is not complete, which has been interpreted to be the result of ‘scarring’. Unemployment does not hurt everybody equally much and a sizable part of the long-term unemployed feels as well as the average employed person does.

Work how much?

A next choice is how much one will work and in this context questions arise such as whether to work full-time or part-time and to retire late or early.

Studies among working people find typically greater happiness among full-time workers than among part-time workers, and change from part-time to full-time tends to go with a small rise in happiness, while a reduction of working hours is often attended with some decline of happiness.

Cross-sectional studies find lower happiness among workers who retire early than among people who continue working until the standard pension age. Yet follow-up studies show a rising happiness among early retirees, which halves the distance to their working age mates.

Make a career? Happiness is often equated with success, success in work in particular. Cross sectional studies show higher happiness among people working in well paying and prestigious jobs, such as among managers and professionals. Yet the few available follow-up studies do not show an effect of job advancement over the life-time.

What kind of work? Cross-sectional studies show modest differences in average happiness across vocations. Managers and professionals tend to be the happiest, possibly because of the autonomy allowed in these occupations. The data do not show much difference in average happiness across blue and white collar jobs. Artists appear to be less happy than average, but due to a lack of longitudinal data we do not know whether this is a causal effect of the profession. Possibly this vocation attracts unhappy people, who are happier as an artist than they would have been as an accountant.

What work conditions? Cross-sectional studies show lower happiness among self-employed people than among wage workers. We do not yet know to what extent this is a causal effect of self-employment, due to a lack of follow-ups of people who change from one condition to the other. Cross-sections also show somewhat greater happiness among people working in the public sector than in the market sector, and again the direction of causality is as yet unclear.

Studies among wage earners show a correlation between happiness and pay, but little correlation with secondary work conditions, such as pension schemes and child care (Benda et al. 2014).

Consumption

Spending money also requires that one makes choices; one is how much to spend, another is what one should buy, for example, should one spend one's money on durables or on experiences?

How much? Cross-sectional studies show greater happiness among people with savings than among people with debts and one study suggests that simplifiers are happier than big spenders. Yet studies on consumption in particular fields show typically positive correlations

with happiness.

On what? People who possess a car, a house and a garden tend to be somewhat happier than people who do not have these goods. The same holds for the possession of luxury goods, such as a boat. Owning plenty of household equipment and electronic devices is also correlated with happiness. The causality is unclear as yet.

Likewise spending on experiences, such as eating out and going to the theater goes with greater happiness. Follow-up studies on holiday travel show uplift during the trip, which disappears when back home.

Personal development

Schooling is compulsory in modern countries, but we can choose how long to stay in school beyond the legal minimum and after elementary school we can also choose between educational specializations. Later in life we can also take additional courses and training. What will that do on our happiness? Some research findings worth considering are presented in [scheme 8](#).

How much education? Adults who have spent more years of their youth in school tend to be happier than age mates who spent less. Yet the ones that reached the highest level of education are not always the happiest, some studies showing the highest average happiness at medium levels of education. Control for income and occupational status, reduces the correlations substantially and sometime even suggest a negative effect of school education as such. However, the causality is unclear as yet, due to a lack of studies that have followed people over their educational careers.

What educational specialization? Comparison of the few available findings on this subject show minor differences in average happiness across adults who have followed different specializations. The differences vary across educational level and no clear pattern appears.

Take a psychological training? Alongside to school education one can take various trainings and therapies for improving wider life abilities. Most such trainings are aimed at dealing with specific problems, such as stress and marital problems. The effects of such courses on happiness have been assessed in some cases and appear to be small or non-existent. Next there are various courses that aim at greater happiness in the first place and the few effects studies on these also show meager results. Probably more such disappointing research findings are buried in file drawers.

So much for the few studies among ‘normal’ persons. Some of the trainings for mental patients seem to add more to happiness.

3.1.4 How compatible is greater happiness with other things one values?

Fit of happiness with other things of worth can be evaluated in two ways: by the degree to which the means used to achieve greater happiness match up with other values we endorse

and by the degree to which happiness-as- such ties in with these things, once achieved (cf. section 3.1.4).

Means to happiness

Several of the above mentioned means used to achieve greater happiness fit well with most other things we value. Pursuing happiness through a good marriage fits widely held family values and enhancing one's happiness by engaging in hard work matches a protestant work ethic. Yet there are also incompatibilities, such as voluntary childlessness leading to population decline and lavish consumption harming the environment. Generalization on such effects is not possible, due to variability across situations and value priorities. Data availability also sets limitations, where happiness is concerned, and more so, in the case of less tangible notions of the good such as 'solidarity', 'equality' and 'justice'. Still, in particular cases, the available findings on conditions for happiness allow for a more or less educated guess.

Happiness-as-such

It is easier to foresee the effects of happiness by itself. Follow-up studies on happiness have documented several beneficial effects¹⁷. Contrary to the notion of the happy as passive 'lotus eaters', happiness appears to foster activity and creativity. This is one of the reasons why happy people tend to work a lot. Contrary to the notion of happy people as 'contented cows', happiness is found to stimulate political interest and activity, happy citizens are better informed and less extreme than their less happy compatriots. There is also good evidence of the positive effects of happiness on health and longevity. The findings on the beneficial effects of happiness fit Fredrickson's (2004) 'broaden and build theory', which holds that positive affect expands one's behavioral scope, which in the long term results in greater resources

A possible negative effect of happiness would seem to be that happiness gives rise to unrealistic optimism and consequently to more risky behavior. There is indeed evidence that the happy worry less about minor things, but as yet no evidence for them to disregard major problems of life. Neither are there indications of happiness leading into reckless behavior. Happy people, for example, appear to use safety belts more often when driving a car (Goudi et al. 2012).

3.2 Information base for corporate choice

As yet we know very little about happiness in organizations. There is a wealth of data on job-satisfaction in work organizations but hardly any comparable data on life-satisfaction. Likewise many care-homes gather information about their client's satisfaction with specific products, such as food, nursing and entertainment, but typically not about their client's satisfaction with life as a whole. An overview of the scanty findings is given below.

¹⁷ World Database of Happiness, [Bibliography of Happiness](#), Subject section Q Consequences of Happiness

3.2.1 Could your people be happier?

Since individuals can get happier (cf. section 4.1.1), the average happiness of employees or clients of an organization should also be open to improvement. However, that may not be possible in any organization. One reason could be that the organization is at the maximum possible level of happiness already, for instance that an average of more than 7 is not feasible in a work organization and an average greater than 5 not possible among the clientele of a care home. As yet we do not really know what level of happiness is possible in what kinds of organizations.

3.2.2 How much of our happiness rests in an organization's control?

The degree of control will obviously depend on the kind of organization, control is evidently high in 'total institutions', such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes.

The case of prisons illustrates that point, a main goal of prisons is punishment and prisons appear to do well on that goal, prisoners being much less happy than the average citizen and even unhappier than psychiatric patients are. Though criminals may not be the most happy anyway, they are unlikely to have been equally unhappy before confinement.

In the case of nursing homes, the organizations are supposed to make people less miserable than they were before entrance, but I do not know of any studies on the effects of such transitions on the happiness of clients.

Most organizations are less 'total' than prisons and nursing homes are and their effects on the happiness of their members will be typically smaller, both because people spend less of their time in the organizational context and because they can quit.

Organizational conditions are part of the livability factors in [scheme 4](#), which together account for some 25% of the variance in happiness within developed nations. Organizational conditions will be only part of this and are therefore unlikely to account for more than 5% of the variance.

3.2.3 How can the organization add to the happiness of its people?

There is superabundance of studies on job-satisfaction in work organizations and also quite a lot of studies on client-satisfaction in service organizations. These findings are often generalized to satisfaction with life-as-a-whole, as appears in Warr's (2007) book 'Work happiness and unhappiness', which is mainly about satisfaction with work. Though job-satisfaction and life-satisfaction are related, both top-down and bottom-up, they are not quite the same and can relate independently to organizational conditions as appears to be the case with non-monetary earnings. The few available findings on the relationship between organizational conditions and happiness are summarized in [scheme 9](#).

The one study that considered organizational size found no correlation, which does not suggest that small is more beautiful happiness wise. Autonomy stands out as a condition for happiness in all three kinds of organizations and in section 4.3.3 we will meet a similar pattern at the nation level.

3.2.4 How well does pursuit of happiness fit in with further aims of the organization?

A general answer to this question is not possible, since organizations pursue different aims. Below I will distinguish between organizations that aim to produce goods, such as factories, and organizations that provide human services, such as care homes and schools.

Production organizations

Profit is the prime aim of most such organizations, so the question is whether investing in the happiness of the companies' personnel will be cost effective.

One aspect of that question is whether the means for producing greater happiness tie in well with other profitability requirements. On this issue the only indication we have is that worker autonomy tends to add to the worker's happiness. This begs the question of how much worker autonomy is optimal for the functioning of the organization, which will vary across persons and situations.

Again we can say more about the effects of greater happiness as such, once realized. Since happiness boosts activity, creativity and solidarity (cf. section 4.1.4), it is likely to add to the profitability of organizations that need such things most, probably software houses more than post offices.

Service organizations

Happiness is an important goal for many service organizations and in particular for care homes. Money is typically short in this industry, so these organizations also face the problem of achieving happiness at a low cost. There seems to be much tacit knowledge on what works best for what kinds of clients, but as yet no hard evidence.

Again happiness in itself is likely to fit wider goals of care, such as enhancing client's autonomy but once more this is a promise rather than established fact.

3.3 Information base for public choice

There is a lot of research on happiness in nations. As noted in the introduction to this section 1.4, some 5000 findings on average happiness in the general public in nations are gathered in the collection 'Happiness in Nations'¹⁸ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012c). These distributional findings form the basis of some 500 correlational findings on societal conditions for happiness that are bunched in the collection 'Correlational Findings'¹⁹ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012d). Do these data provide a basis for informed public choice on matters of happiness? Let us again consider the four steps.

3.3.1 Could citizens be happier?

Several men of learning have denounced the pursuit of greater happiness of a greater number as an illusion (cf. section 3.3.1). What do the data tell us? Firstly, that there are huge differences in average happiness across nations, secondly that happiness has changed

¹⁸ World Database of Happiness, [Happiness in Nations](#), [Ranks Average Happiness in Nations](#), [Trends Average Happiness in nations](#)

¹⁹ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Conditions in Nation](#)

considerably in some countries and thirdly that happiness has risen slightly in most countries of the world over the last 40 years.

Great happiness of a great number of citizens is possible

Most people are happy, at least in developed countries. In [scheme 8](#) we have seen the distribution of responses to a question on happiness in Germany; the average score on that 0-10 scale was 7.2. Higher average scores are observed in several other developed nations, with the highest of all in Denmark, where average happiness is 8.3. The most recent world-map of average happiness in nations is presented in [Scheme 10](#).

Greater happiness of a great number is also possible

Happiness is assessed periodically using identical survey questions in several nations. This allows comparison over time within nations. Three examples are presented in [scheme 11](#). These data show that happiness is not immutable. Average happiness declined in Russia at the time of the Ruble-crisis and improved a lot in the following ten years. Note that average happiness has also improved in Denmark, which is the happiest country of the world. So gains are possible even at the higher levels. Denmark may now be at the maximal possible level of happiness, if so, there is clearly considerable room for improvement in all other countries of the world.

Happiness has risen in most nations

An analysis of the available time-series on average happiness in nations shows a gradual rise in most nations (Veenhoven & Vergunst 2014). This rise appears on all kinds of survey questions used.

Contrary to the Easterlin paradox, there is a correlation with economic growth. Not only have both happiness and GDP gone up in most countries over the last 40 years, but the rise in happiness also tends to be greater in the countries where GDP has increased the most. The effect sizes are small however and only become visible when longer series are considered. These data were not available when Easterlin's 'paradox' was launched in 1974.

3.3.2 To what extent is greater happiness in the hands of governments?

The world map in [scheme 10](#) shows wide differences in average happiness across contemporary nations. Part of these differences may be due to factors which governments cannot control such as climate and genes. There is good evidence for an independent effect of climate on average happiness in nations; the hotter, the less happy (VandeVliert et al. 2004). There are also indications of genetic factors, such as allelic frequency of the serotonin transporter functional polymorphism (5-HTTLPR), which seems to have co-evolved with the individualism/collectivism of cultures and may affect happiness directly and indirectly (Chiao & Blizinski 2010). These effects seem small however and dwarf in comparison with the societal determinants of happiness, which, as we will see in the next section, explain some 75% of the variation of average happiness across nations.

3.3.3 What can governments do to enhance happiness?

The first analyses of societal conditions for happiness (Easterlin 1974, Veenhoven 1984) drew on data for a handful of nations, mostly western nations. Today we have data on more than 140 nations, which cover some 95% of the world's population. Cross-sectional analysis of these data shows strong correlations and together the societal variables used explain about 75% of the variance in average happiness across nations. Data for trend-analysis are less abundant as yet.

The key findings on societal correlates of happiness are presented in [scheme 12](#). All these findings concern things that governments can influence and most of these things are on the governments agenda already.

Economic development

People live clearly happier in rich nations than in poor ones, the zero-order correlation with real income per head being +.65. About half of the correlation remains after control for other societal characteristics, such as freedom and rule of law. Such controls may underestimate the real effect of the economy, since freedom and justice depend to some extent on economic development.

The independent effect of economic affluence on happiness is not yet fully understood. In part it is probably in the benefits of material comfort, but the correlation may also reflect a positive effect on happiness of economic activity as such, happiness being both a matter of work for pence and play.

As was noted above, there is also some correlation between economic growth and happiness, though there are many exceptions to this pattern. In spite of considerable economic growth since the 1960s, the Japanese have not got any happier. In the post communist countries of Eastern Europe economic (re)development was initially accompanied by a drop in happiness during the 1990s until the expected rise in happiness manifested in the early 2000s. A similar V-pattern on a larger time-scale seems to be happening in China.

So far the data do not suggest that zero-growth will make us happier.

Freedom

Average happiness is also higher in nations where choice is least restricted. This manifests in economic life, in political life and in private life. The effect of economic freedom on happiness is greater in developing nations than in developed ones and the effect of political freedom greater in the latter than in the former. Trend data on freedom are not available as yet.

Governments can enhance freedom by lessening restrictions, such as those on starting a new business or founding a political movement. They can also enhance freedom by strengthening a citizen's capability to choose. For more detail see Veenhoven (2008a).

Equality

Surprisingly, there is no correlation between average happiness and income inequality in nations. This pattern of non-correlation also appears in different parts of the world (Berg & Veenhoven 2010). The disadvantages of income inequality emphasized by the left seem to be balanced by the benefits claimed by the right.

Yet there is a strong correlation between happiness and gender-equality in nations, the more emancipated the women in a country are, the higher average happiness. A trend analysis by Stevenson & Wolfers (2009) suggests that the gain is not found in the feminist advance guard.

Security

Safety is another condition for happiness over which governments have control. Fighting crime is typically high on the agenda, violent crime in particular. Yet the data show little correlation with murder rate, while white collar crime (corruption) appears to affect happiness more negatively. Likewise rates of death due to accidents correlate stronger with average happiness in nations than homicide rates do. This calls for more research into these hidden happiness leaks.

At first sight there is a positive correlation between average happiness and social security in nations, both when measured in terms of entitlements and in expenditures. Yet the correlation disappears when GDP is controlled. People appear to be no happier in generous welfare states than in equally rich nations where Father State is less open handed. In a recent comparison over time I found no corresponding change in happiness in nations that had cut spending on social welfare or had expanded their spending (Veenhoven 2011). This is not to say that the welfare state should be abandoned for the sake of happiness, rather the data imply that this issue is happiness neutral.

Institutional quality

The happiness of citizens also depends on the quality of various institutions in their society, such as their educational system, health services and their juridical system, and, what is particular important, is the technical quality of government. Are the civil servants competent or corrupt, are rules transparent? Good governance is the strongest correlate of average happiness, slightly stronger than economic development. One of the reasons is probably that good governance makes life more predictable and that a well organized society allows individuals more choice. More detail can be found in Ott (2010, 2011).

Promoting institutional quality is again something that governments can do, and this is something beyond dispute.

Modernity

Much of the above mentioned conditions are part of a wider pattern of 'modern' society. Consequently we also see positive correlations with other indicators of modernity, such as urbanization, education and globalization. Prophets of doom associate modernization with increasing misery, but the data show a positive correlation with happiness. We now live longer and happier than ever before in human history and both longevity and happiness are still on the rise. One of the reasons for this seems to be that modern (post)industrial society fits human nature better than traditional society, which roots in the agrarian phase of societal development (Veenhoven 2010).

The least governments can do is to acknowledge this fact and to put the brake on restorative tendencies, which typically accompany the modernization process. Governments can also encourage modernization, as most governments in fact do on various fields, such as

research and development aid. Modernization is to some extent an autonomous process, but governments can surf on its waves.

3.3.4 How compatible is happiness promotion with other aims of public policy?

This would be the end of the story for a radical utilitarian, who is only interested in maximizing the level of happiness in a country. Yet governments pursue multiple goals, so the question is how well then pursuit of greater happiness will fit their wider policy mix. Again I will consider the match of both means to happiness and achieved happiness.

Means to greater happiness

The means to happiness mentioned in [scheme 12](#) are all on the political agenda, both because they are deemed desirable in their own right and because they are instrumental to other policy aims. Even if economic growth and social equality would not add to happiness, most governments would still pursue these goals, if only for the sake of social stability.

In most of the cases there is synergy: continued pursuit of economic growth, gender equality and rule of law will also add to the cause of happiness. Some of the common aims do not add to greater happiness, as is the case with income equality and social security. Yet these things do not detract from happiness either, so there is no conflict.

Obviously, there are also conflicts, for instance in war when the aim of national security required sacrificing happiness. A less dramatic and more recent example is the general raise in the pension age in the developed world, which is likely to lower the happiness of a considerable number of people, since our current pre-pensioners were found to become happier when they stopped working²⁰.

Happiness as such

Once achieved, happiness seems to fit well with most of the goals that governments pursue in developed nations. Happy citizens are economically more productive and politically more responsible. They even seem to cheat less on taxes (Gruen 2009). Happiness also adds to health, and the common goal of 'Health for all', matches well with the pursuit of 'Greater happiness for a greater number' (Veenhoven 2008b). Likewise happiness adds to the formation of 'social capital', happiness strengthening intimate networks and facilitating participation in voluntary organizations.

²⁰ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Retirement](#), R3.1.2 Change in retirement status

4 WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW YET, BUT CAN GET TO KNOW

We know now a lot more about happiness than we did when I entered this field in the 1970s. Still there are a lot blank spots, as we have seen from [scheme 2](#), and in more detail on the [schemes 5,6,7,9, 9](#) and [12](#). Now that this strand of research has matured, it should not be too difficult to fill these gaps. We have passed the teething troubles of conceptualization and measurement, the subject is acceptable for funding agencies and there are a lot of good and interested researchers around. What topics deserve priority? Which methods promise the most relevant results?

4.1 What?

The following blank spots strike the eye in each of the separate domains.

Information for private choice

Looking back at the finding schemes a first notable thing is the many blank spots in [schemes 7](#). We spend considerable amounts of money in consumption, but are largely in the blind to the effects of this spending on our happiness. Due to this lack of sound information on how spending affects our happiness, our choices often depend too much on advertising, which stimulates producers to invest in marketing rather than in product improvement. So this is a priority topic, in particular for happiness economics.

The many blank spots in [scheme 8](#) mark a variation of the above. The life coaching business claims to improve our happiness, but cannot provide solid evidence of effectiveness. This is not only to the disadvantage of their clients, but in the end it is also detrimental for the sector. Once there is good evidence of effectiveness of life coaching, the market for such services will probably triple.

In the case of education there is a striking lack on information of the effects of educational specialization on happiness, which is akin to the lack of information on the effects of occupational choice, noted in section 4.1.3. Again an industry falls short; there is quite a business in vocational guidance that is not backed up with sound knowledge on the consequences of making these choices for this valued outcome.

The available data only provide information about effects on the average person. We have little to no data on how choice will work out for particular kinds of people.

Information for corporate choice

A look at [scheme 9](#) shows us that as yet we know very little about happiness in organizations. Only a few topics have been addressed and analyses in this field are rudimentary. There is an absence of follow-up studies So this is an obvious priority.

One of the problems in this domain is the absence of good datasets. Our knowledge on happiness at the micro level of individuals and at the macro-level of nations is built largely on welfare surveys, instigated in the context of marketing research for welfare services. As yet, there are no such sources of data for the meso-level of organizations. A program of

comparative happiness monitoring in organizations would be most welcome.

For the time being, managers must make do with the available information on job-satisfaction and they remain unaware of organizational conditions that affect happiness through other channels.

Information for public choice

We are pretty well informed about how happy people are in nations and what conditions foster the happiness of most citizens. Yet our information on the latter is limited to tangible things on which comparable international statistics are available. We are largely blind to the effects of cultural factors such as the quality of programs on TV and socialization practices. Possibly this is a clue to the relatively high levels of happiness found in Latin American countries.

Most of our knowledge about societal conditions for happiness is based on cross-sectional analyses. Now that the data time-series are growing, we can get a view on effects of changes in societal conditions on change in happiness, as has already been done for the cases of economic growth and social security.

Though most societal conditions for happiness seem to be universal (Veenhoven 2010a), we must keep an open mind for variations across different kinds of nations, such as the relatively great impact of economic freedom in poor nations. Such split-ups become feasible now that we have data on almost all countries of the world.

4.2 How?

What methods are required to gather this missing knowledge about happiness? What kind of data do we need? What approaches should we use to analyze the data we obtain?

Panel studies

In [schemes 5-6-7-8-9](#) and [12](#) we saw many blank spots in the column of follow-up data. We badly need panel studies, since these are required if we want to separate cause and effect. The challenge is not to start new panels that focus primarily on happiness, but rather to get happiness included in existing panels, such as follow-up studies on health and nutrition. At present, many publications in happiness economics draw on one single question on life-satisfaction that was wisely incorporated in the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP) in 1984. We need to expand our reach in this field.

Electronic diaries

Most of the now available information on happiness has been gathered using questionnaires on which people report how happy they feel most of the time and what they usually do. In follow-up studies the same questions are repeated at intervals of a month or a year. This method is vulnerable to various recollection biases, and it also misses out much information about the individual's daily life. In the case of work, we may get an estimate of the hours worked and on how well the respondents gets on with colleagues, but not of the things that happen during the day and how these affect daily mood.

One of the ways to deal with these problems is to use time diaries in which

respondents also record how well they feel. An example is the earlier mentioned Happiness Indicator²¹ (Oerlemans et. al 2012). This tool was designed to allow respondents to compare their own happiness with the happiness of comparable people, following the information demand described in section 3.1.1. It is also suited for long-term follow-ups and the ultimate goal of the project is to gather information about how major life choices, such as having children or not, work out for the happiness of different kinds of people. The method is also suited to monitoring happiness in organizations, and for following the happiness of students long after they have left school.

Since such diaries are kept on the internet, using a PC, tablet or I-Phone, the costs of data gathering are very low. Yet this method requires considerable investment in motivating participants.

Experiments

The best way to establish causality is to do experiments. Laboratory experiments are not so possible on the subject of happiness; since data collected in this manner will limit to transient mood. Still, natural experiments are possible as in the case of determining if therapies work, when treated and control groups are compared. Natural experiments are also possible in organizations. The above mentioned happiness tracking tools will be useful for such purposes, in the case of the Happiness Indicator it will also be useful because matched control groups can be selected from the wider pool of participants.

Focus on specification and contingencies

Analyses in happiness research are often focused on isolated particular effects, such as the effect of income on happiness, net of things like education, marital status and health. Though interesting for some purposes, data of such ‘pure’ effects is this is not what people really need when making choices. What they want to know is whether more or less income is likely to make them happier, given their situation, such as, their poor education, their second marriage and their health condition. To serve that demand, data split-ups are required rather than the distillation of pure effects. Such specifications set high demands on sample size. An example of a dataset that is large enough for detailed specification is the ‘Wage Indicator’²².

Likewise, the organizations are getting little wiser with respect to general tendencies. What they want to know is how things have worked out in similar settings and what are the contingencies involved.

Similarly, governments want to know what conditions are most critical for happiness in their country. Though the available data suggest much universality in conditions for happiness (Veenhoven 2010a) we must keep an open eye for cultural variations.

Accumulation of knowledge

Lastly there is the problem of keeping an overview of the growing pile of research findings. The greater the pile, the more information disappears under the surface. Literature reviews become more selective and cherry picking becomes more common. One solution to this

²¹ <http://www.happinessindicator.com>

²² <http://www.wageindicator.org>. Dutch version: [http:// www.loonwijzer.nl](http://www.loonwijzer.nl)

problem is specialization, which means that some people get to know more about less. This is not the best way to obtain a well assessable body of knowledge, such as that required for the pursuit of happiness at all three levels discussed in this paper.

An alternative of my own making is the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2013), used in this paper. This ‘findings archive’ stores standardized descriptions of research findings that can be sorted in many ways, such as on subject, method and population. See the earlier description in section 1.2 of this paper. This approach is becoming even more fruitful now that the stream of research findings on happiness is growing exponentially.

Yet this growth also makes it more difficult to keep the database up to data. For that reason I welcome colleagues willing to take responsibility of a particular part of the collection, such as a particular subject like ‘Happiness and Poverty’ or research on happiness in a particular country such as ‘Happiness in Chile’. Information on the role of an ‘associate’ is available in section 7.2 of the latest paper on this project (Veenhoven 2011b).

5 CONCLUSIONS

Empirical research on happiness has taught us that greater happiness is possible. Most individuals can become happier than they are and average happiness in nations can also be improved. Probably the same holds for happiness in most organizations.

Research has also taught us that obtaining greater happiness is, for a great deal, in our own hands, our happiness depends on conditions we can improve and on abilities we can develop. This applies both for individuals and institutions.

Research is less conclusive on how greater happiness can be achieved. The available research findings provide strong clues for public choice, but as yet less so for individual choice and there is little data for evidence based organizational choice.

Consequently we are still largely in the dark about how well the means required to obtain greater happiness fit other things we value. Still we do know that greater happiness, as such, typically fosters wider worth.

Future research should prioritize under-researched topics, such as the effects of consumption and occupational choice on happiness. We need follow-up studies to identify causal effects and large samples to specify how choices work out for particular kinds of people. Natural experiments are required to establish causal effects. As well as gathering more data we should invest in organizing the available research findings and making these findings easily available.

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Scheme 1

What we SHOULD know about happiness

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Answers required for informed choice of..</i>		
	<i>individuals</i>	<i>organizations</i>	<i>governments</i>
Can we get happier?			
How happy are we?			
How far-off from what is possible?			
To what extent is happiness in our control?			
How much a matter of genes?			
How much a matter of luck?			
How much matter of choice?			
What to choose for greater happiness?			
Improve what conditions?			
Develop what capabilities?			
Engage in what activities/strategies?			
How compatible with further goals?			
Means to greater happiness			
Happiness-as-such			

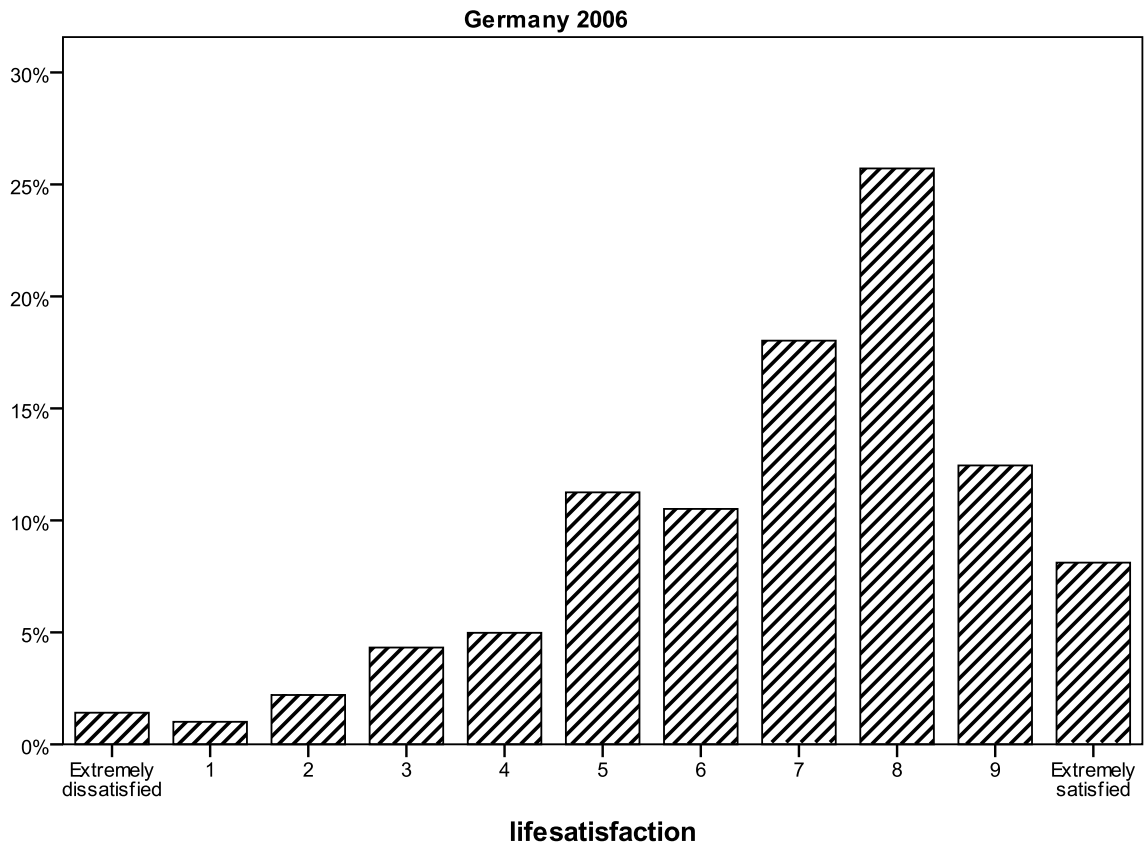
Scheme 2

What we DO know about happiness

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Answers required for informed choice of..</i>		
	<i>individuals</i>	<i>organizations</i>	<i>governments</i>
Can we get happier?			
- How happy are we?			
- How far-off from what is possible?			
To what extent is happiness in our control?			
- How much matter of genes?			
- How much a matter of luck?			
- How much matter of choice?			
What to choose for greater happiness?			
- Improve what conditions?			
- Develop what capabilities?			
- Engage in what activities/strategies?			
How compatible with further goals?			
- Means to greater happiness			
- Consequences of happiness-as-such			

Shading of cells indicates availability of research findings	
	none
	a few
	some
	considerable
	a lot

Scheme 3
Happiness in Germany



Scheme 4

Explained variance of individual happiness within modern nations

Livability of environment

- Socio-economic position²³ ± 5%
- Social ties²⁴ ± 5%
- Life-events²⁵ ± 15%

Life-ability of individuals

- Genetic endowment²⁶ ± 30%
- Learned skills ± 15%?
- Life-choice ± 10%?

As yet unexplained ± 20%?

²³ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Summed effects](#) S5.2.1

²⁴ World Database of Happiness, [Findings on Happiness and Summed effects](#) S5.2.34

²⁵ Headey & Wearing (1992, chapter 8)

²⁶ Bartels & Boomsma (2009)

Scheme 5

Some findings on happiness and family

<i>Subject of private choice</i>	<i>Available research findings</i>			<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i>
	<i>on people in general</i>		<i>on particular kinds of people</i>	
	<i>cross sectional</i>	<i>longitudinal</i>		
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>		
<i>Marry?</i>				
<i>Live together?</i>	++	+	+	Findings on Happiness and Marriage Career M1.1.1.1 Ever lived as married, M1.2.1 Recent entering marriage Findings on Happiness and Current Marital Status , M2.1 Married (vs. not)
<i>Have affairs?</i>	+			Findings on happiness and Sex life S3.2.3 sexual promiscuity
<i>Split-up?</i>	-	-	+/-	Findings on Happiness and Marriage Career M1.1.2.1 Ever divorced, M1.2.2.1 Recent divorce Findings on Happiness and Current Marital Status , M2.1.3 Divorced
<i>Remarry?</i>	+	+	+	Findings on Happiness and Marriage Career M1.1. 2.3 Ever re-married, M1.2.1.3 Recent re-marriage Findings on Happiness and Current Marital Status , M2.4 Remarried
<i>Raise a family?</i>				
<i>Have children?</i>	+	+/-	-	Findings on happiness and Having Children C3.1.1 Ever had children, C3.1.4.2 Got children
<i>How many?</i>	+/-	+/-	+/-	Findings on happiness and Having Children C3.2.1 Number of children

Scheme 6

Some findings on happiness and work

<i>Subject of private choice</i>	<i>Available research findings</i>			<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i>
	<i>on people in general</i>		<i>on particular kinds of people</i>	
	<i>cross sectional</i>			
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>		
<i>Work at all?</i>				
<i>Keep out of paid work?</i>	-	-	-	Findings on Happiness and Employment E2.2 Current employment status
<i>Be a full-time mother?</i>	+/-	+/-	+/-	Findings on Happiness and Employment E2.2.1 Full-time home maker
<i>How much?</i>				
<i>Full-time?</i>	+	+		Findings on Happiness and Employment E.2.4 Size of job
<i>Early retirement?</i>	-	+	+	Findings on Happiness and Retirement R3.3.6 Early retirement
<i>Make career?</i>	+	+	0	Findings on Happiness and Social Mobility S5.2 Current mobility status Findings on Happiness and Occupation O1.1.3.1 Advancement in current job
<i>In what kind of work?</i>				
<i>Manager?</i>	+	+		Findings on Happiness and Occupation O1.2.1 Kind of occupation Findings on Happiness and Leadership L2.2 Current leadership behavior
<i>White collar job?</i>	0/+	0		Findings on Happiness and Occupation O1.2.1 Manual/non-manual
<i>Artist?</i>	-			Findings on Happiness and Occupation O1.2.1 Kind of occupation
<i>In what work conditions?</i>				
<i>Self employed?</i>	-	-		Findings on Happiness and Employment E2.5.3 Self employed
<i>Public sector?</i>	0	+		Findings on Happiness and Employment E2.5.1 Public sector
<i>Commuting time</i>	0	-		Findings on happiness and Work conditions W4.2.3 Commuting to work
<i>Pay</i>	+	+		Findings on Happiness and Income I1.2 Current income

Scheme 7

Some findings on happiness and consumption

<i>Subject of private choice</i>	<i>Available research findings</i>				<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i>
	<i>on people in general</i>			<i>on particular kinds of people</i>	
	<i>cross sectional</i>		<i>longitudinal</i>		
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>			
Spend how much?					
Simplifiers	+				Findings on Happiness and Life style L9.2.2.1 Alternative lifestyle
Savings/Debts	+				Findings on Happiness and Possessions P10.2.3 Debts, P10.2.5 Savings
Health insurance	+				Findings on Happiness and Possessions P10.2.4 Insurances
On what?					
Car	+	-			Findings on Happiness and Possessions P10.2.2.2 Car
House	+	+			Findings on Happiness and Housing H14.2.2 Owned or rented
Garden	+				Findings on Happiness and Housing H14.2.3.1 Quality of house
Household equipment	+	0/+			Findings on Happiness and Possessions
Electronic equipment	+	+			Findings on Happiness and Possessions P10.2.4 Internet, P10.2.5 TV, P10.2.6 Telephone
Luxuries	+				Findings on Happiness and Possessions P10.2.2 Specific possessions
Food	+	0/+			Findings on Happiness and Nutrition N10.2.4 How much one spends on eating
Theater	+				Findings on Happiness and Cultural Participation , C12.2.1 Passive participation
Holliday trips	+	+	0		Findings on happiness and Leisure L3.3.2.10 Traveling

Scheme 8

Some findings on happiness and personal development

<i>Subject of private choice</i>	<i>Available research findings</i>				<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i>
	<i>on people in general</i>			<i>on particular kinds of people</i>	
	<i>cross sectional</i>		<i>longitudinal experimental</i>		
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>			
What education?					
Years in school	+	+/-			Findings of Happiness and Education E2.1.1 Years of education
Level of education	+/-	+/0/-			Findings of Happiness and Education E2.1.2 Level of education
Educational specialization					Findings of Happiness and Education E2.1.4 Educational specialization
Have a training?					
Stress reduction, meditation			+		Findings on Happiness and Therapy T2.2.8 Effects of meditation, mindfulness
Coping with illness			0/+		Findings on Happiness and Therapy T2.2.6 Effects of rehabilitation
Marriage counseling			+		Findings on Happiness and Therapy T2.2.3 Effects of family/marriage therapy
Happiness training			+/0		Findings on Happiness and Therapy T2.2.2 Effects of happiness trainings

Scheme 9

Some findings on happiness and conditions in organizational conditions

<i>Type of organization</i>	<i>Available research findings</i>				<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i>
	<i>on people in general</i>		<i>on particular kinds of people</i>		
	<i>cross sectional</i>		<i>longitudinal</i>		
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>	<i>experimental</i>		
Care homes					
Autonomy	+				Findings on Happiness and Institutional Living I2.3.1 Restrictiveness of setting
Cloister					
Size	0				Findings on Happiness and Institutional Living I2.3.5 Size of Institution
Autonomy	+				Findings on Happiness and Work Conditions W4.2.11 Self direction at work
Work organizations					
Size	+				Findings on Happiness and Work Conditions W4.2.1 Size of plant
Supportive leadership	+				Findings on Happiness and Work Conditions W4.2.8.3 Leadership of boss
Autonomy	+	+			Findings on Happiness and Work Conditions W4.2.11 Self direction at work

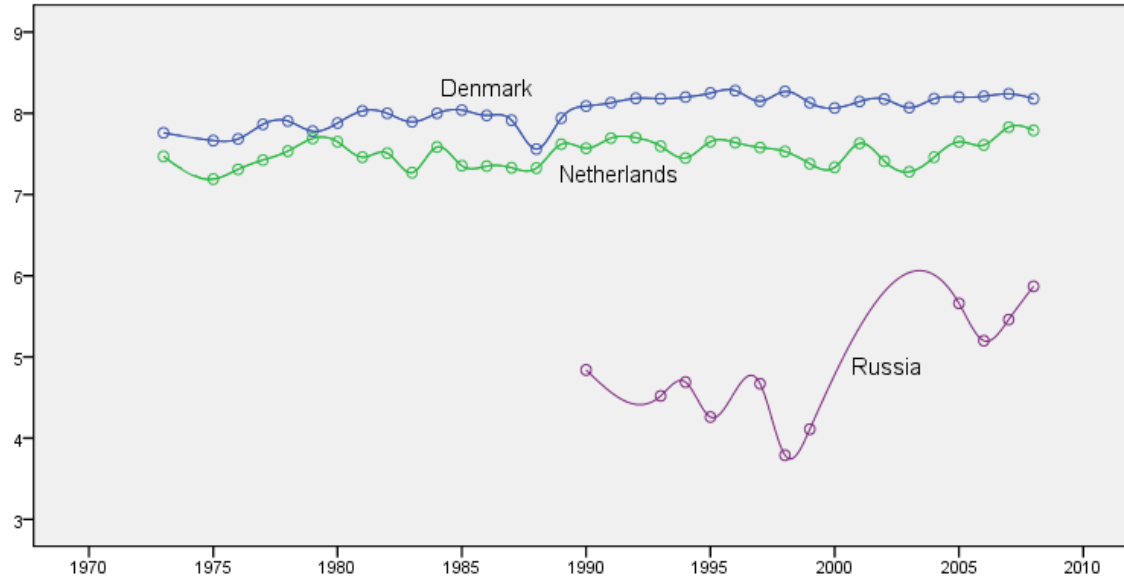
Scheme 10

Average happiness in nations in 2000-2009 on scale 0-10



Scheme 11

Change of average happiness in three nations 1973-2009



Source: World Database of Happiness, Collection [Happiness in Nations](#) (Veenhoven 2013c)

Scheme 12

Some societal conditions for happiness

<i>Subject of public choice</i>	<i>Evidence available</i>				<i>Link to findings in World Database of Happiness</i> Findings on Happiness and Conditions in Nations
	<i>on the general population</i>		<i>longitudinal</i>	<i>on particular kinds of countries</i>	
	<i>cross sectional</i>				
	<i>raw</i>	<i>partial</i>			
Wealth					
GDP p/c	+	+	+		N4.1.3 Economic affluence
Freedom					
Economic freedom	+	+			N4.15.3 Economic freedom
Political freedom	+	+			N4.15.2 Political freedom
Private freedom	+	+			N4.15.1 Private freedom
Equality					
Income equality	0	0			N4.8.2 Income inequality
Gender equality	+	+			N4.8.1 Gender inequality
Security					
Physical security; murder rate	0	0			N4.13 Safety
Social security	+	0	0		N4.5.1.4 Social security
Institutional quality					
Rule of law	+	+			N4.10 Justice
Good governance	+	+			N4.6.6 Quality of Government
Modernity					
Urbanization	+	+			N4.2.4 Urbanization
Globalization	+	+			Findings on happiness and position of the nation
<i>Explained variance</i>	75%				

APPENDIX**Key to summary markers in schemes 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 12**

++	=	very positive
+	=	positive
+/-	=	mixed findings, both positive and negative
-	=	negative
0	=	unrelated

Shading of cells indicates availability of research findings	
	none
	a few
	some
	considerable
	a lot