

HAPPINESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Pattern of cheerful discontent¹

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1 BAD LIFE IN SA?

There are a lot of social problems in South-Africa, such as poverty, crime and conflicts. Newspapers report on it daily and large numbers of citizens feel that government does not handle these problems adequately. Consequently protest parties reap many votes. Does this mean that life is bad in South Africa?

Measures of quality of life

Quality of life in a country is typically judged on the basis of objective conditions alongside negatives such as the above-mentioned problems, presence of positives, such as income per head, level of education and mutual trust. Indicators for these conditions are usually added in an 'index', such as the Index of Social Progress (Estes, 1984).

Several problems with such accounts of quality of life in a country exist. One is that one can never capture all relevant living conditions, particularly not if unique to a country, such as the presence of biltong in local supermarkets in SA. A second problem is assessing the relative importance of items in the index. Is petty crime more important than hours of sunshine? A more fundamental problem is that selection and weighing of living conditions is based on assumptions, which in their turn root in values and theory. Actually, these indexes do not measure quality of life as such, but presence of conditions believed to make for a good life. This is called assumed quality of life.

Another approach is to assess how well people actually flourish in a country and this is called apparent quality of life (Veenhoven, 2005). One way of measuring how well people thrive is by asking them how much they enjoy their life as a whole. If most inhabitants of a country are happy, the problems in their society are apparently tolerable or sufficiently compensated for by positive things.

Focus on happiness

In this paper we assess apparent quality of life in South Africa in this manner and answer the following questions: How happy are South Africans currently? How is their happiness compared to other countries? And, is the level of happiness in SA going up or down? For that purpose we take stock of the available research findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2015a) and in particular those in the section on South Africa in the mentioned findings archive (Veenhoven, 2015b).

Happiness is the subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole; in other words, how much you like the life you lead. This is also known as 'life satisfaction'. Since this is what we have in mind, it can be measured using questions.

Satisfaction with *your own life* is not the same as satisfaction with *living conditions in your country*. You can enjoy your own life and still think that living conditions in the country are poor. It is also possible for you to think that you live in the best possible country, but still be depressed. Studies in developed nations have shown that citizens are typically positive

¹ Updated in the paper 'South Africans are fairly happy', published in Optentia Newsletter 2012, 2 (4)

about their personal life, but negative about the society they live in. In the words of Paul Schnabel (in Dekker & DenRidder, 2011): *I am doing well, but we are not.*

This difference has several reasons. One is that we are better informed about our own life than about the life of the average citizen. Another reason lies in the natural inclination to pay more attention to what is wrong than what is right and the amplification of that perceptual bias by the media, for which good news is no news. This dominance of discontent with society in the media is another reason for focussing this paper on satisfaction with personal life.

2 AVERAGE HAPPINESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The first representative survey study that involved questions concerning happiness in South Africa was held in 1981 and the most recent study in 2014. In this paper we focus on the findings of periodical survey studies that have used the same question over the years and that allow comparison with other nations.

To that end we will first present findings of the World Values Survey (WVS), the latest wave of which was held in 2013. One of the questions presented to a representative sample of the adult population reads as follows: “Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life-as-a-whole these days? Please rate in a number between 1 and 10, where 1 stand for ‘dissatisfied’ and 10 [for] ‘satisfied’”². The distribution of responses is presented below in **Figure 1**.

In this bar-chart we can see that most South Africans are happy, 8 out of 10 rate their life at 6 or higher. Approximately 45% are very satisfied and rate their life at 8 or higher, 30% are fairly happy and rate their life at 7 or to 6. Still 25% of the South Africans rate their life at 5 or lower, among which some 10% is even very unhappy and scores 3, 2 or 1. The average on this 1 to 10 scale is 6.6, which corresponds to 6.2 on the more commonly used 0 to 10 scale.

In this same survey study respondents also answered a question on how ‘happy’ they are. 39% ticked the option ‘very happy’ and 37% the option ‘quite happy’ 23% indicated to be unhappy, ticking the options ‘not at all happy’ or ‘not too happy’³, which corresponds to the 25% scoring 5 or lower on the above-mentioned question on life satisfaction and these numbers also fit the pattern of responses to the question on life-satisfaction.

Life-satisfaction was also assessed in five more surveys of the South African population since the year 2000, the findings of which are presented in the nation report ‘Happiness in South Africa’ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2015b). All these studies found somewhat lower scores. The average over the last 15 years is about 6 on a 0-10 scale.

3 HOW HAPPY ARE SOUTH AFRICANS RELATIVELY?

This same question on life-satisfaction has been answered by representative samples of the population on 149 nations between 2000 and 2009 and the average scores are listed in the ‘Rank report on a verage happiness in nations’ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2015c). A ranking list on the next 10-year period 2005-2014 is not yet available, so we compare how South Africa did some time ago. The average in that period was 5.8.

² In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded O-SWI-c-sq-n-10-a

³ In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded O-HL-u-sq-v-v-a

Costa Rica is at the top of the ranking list with an average of 8.5⁴ and the lowest is Togo with an average of 2.6. With its average of 5.8 South Africa was in the middle, which is in position 78 of this list of 149 nations.

The happiness in all countries is depicted on the world map in [Figure 2](#) – the darker the green the happier the country. It is easy to see that South Africa is among the happiest countries on the African continent, but that average happiness in South Africa is lower than in the America's and in Western Europe. Happiness-wise South Africa is comparable to Eastern Europe.

4 DID SOUTH AFRICANS BECOME HAPPIER?

In order to assess whether South Africans became more or less happy over time, we must rely on surveys that used the same question in the same context at different points in time. The best available series comes from the above-mentioned World Values Survey, which was held in 1981, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2007 and 2011. The observed scores on the above-mentioned question on life-satisfaction are presented in [Figure 3](#)

Over these years the average was around 6, with a slight dip in the 1990s and a slight rise since 2007. Scores on the question on happiness in the World Values Survey follow a similar pattern. Time series in other surveys show a more mixed picture, but none of these covers the most recent years. So it seems that South African happiness has gone up a bit over the last 10 years.

5 FEELING HAPPY AND BEING CONTENT

When assessing how much we like the life we live, we draw on two sources of information; how well we feel most of the time and how well life-as-it-is fits our notions of how-life-should-be. These sub-appraisals are seen as 'components' of happiness: an affective component called 'hedonic level of affect' and a cognitive component called 'contentment' respectively (Veenhoven, 1984: Chapter 2). See [Figure 4](#).

The affective component is determined by the gratification of needs in the first place and roots as such in human nature. The cognitive component is rather determined by the realization of wants which root in human culture (Veenhoven 2009). Though these components are related, they can differ; one can feel good most of the time but be discontent, or be content cognitively but feel miserable affectively. The affective component appears to dominate in the overall evaluation of life (Veenhoven, 2009).

These components of happiness can be measured separately and data on each are also available for most countries of the world (Veenhoven, 2015d). This allows us to assess how these components balance in South Africa.

Level of affect

The best available measure of hedonic level of affect in nations is an affect balance scale constructed from responses to 11 questions on how one had felt yesterday in the Gallup World Poll in 2012. Part of these questions concern positive feeling, e.g. "I laughed a lot" and part concern negative feelings, e.g. "I felt worried". All questions are answered with either 'yes' or 'no'. The percentage of yes-answers to negative items is subtracted from the percentage of yes answers to positive items⁵.

Positive feeling appears to be more frequent in all countries of the world and the difference is therefore always positive. Differences range from 19% in Armenia to 61% in New Zealand. In South Africa positive feelings outweigh negative feelings by 56%, which is close to the 57% in the UK and not far from the highest score of 61% in New Zealand.

So, affect level is relatively high in South Africa, for instance higher than in Northern Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

⁴ The score of 8,5 for Costa Rica is based on only one survey with 1 000 respondents. The next happiest country is Denmark with an average of 8,3 based on 8 surveys between 2000 and 2009

⁵ In the World Database of Happiness this measure is coded A-AB-yd-mq-v-2-o

Contentment

Contentment is measured using Cantril's (1965) question on how one rates one's present life on a ladder of which the top represents the 'best possible life' and the bottom the 'worst possible life'⁶. Average scores range from 3 in Togo to 7.8 in Denmark. In South Africa the score is 5.0, which is the around-the-world average.

6 CHEERFUL DISCONTENT

Thus South Africans tend to score relatively high on the affective component of happiness and average on the cognitive component. This reflects a more general pattern of cheerful discontent in broader Africa (Brule & Veenhoven 2014).

This begs the question of what is most indicative of a good life, cheerful discontent or depressed contentment. Above we already indicated that feeling good signals that human needs are being met, while contentment is perceived realization of wants. Gratification of needs is clearly more important than getting what you want. What is more, depressed contentment gives rise to passivity, while cheerful discontent fosters activity. The combination of high mood but low contentment will foster full functioning – all in all a reason to be happy about this pattern of happiness in South Africa.

⁶ In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded C-BW-c-sq-l-11-c

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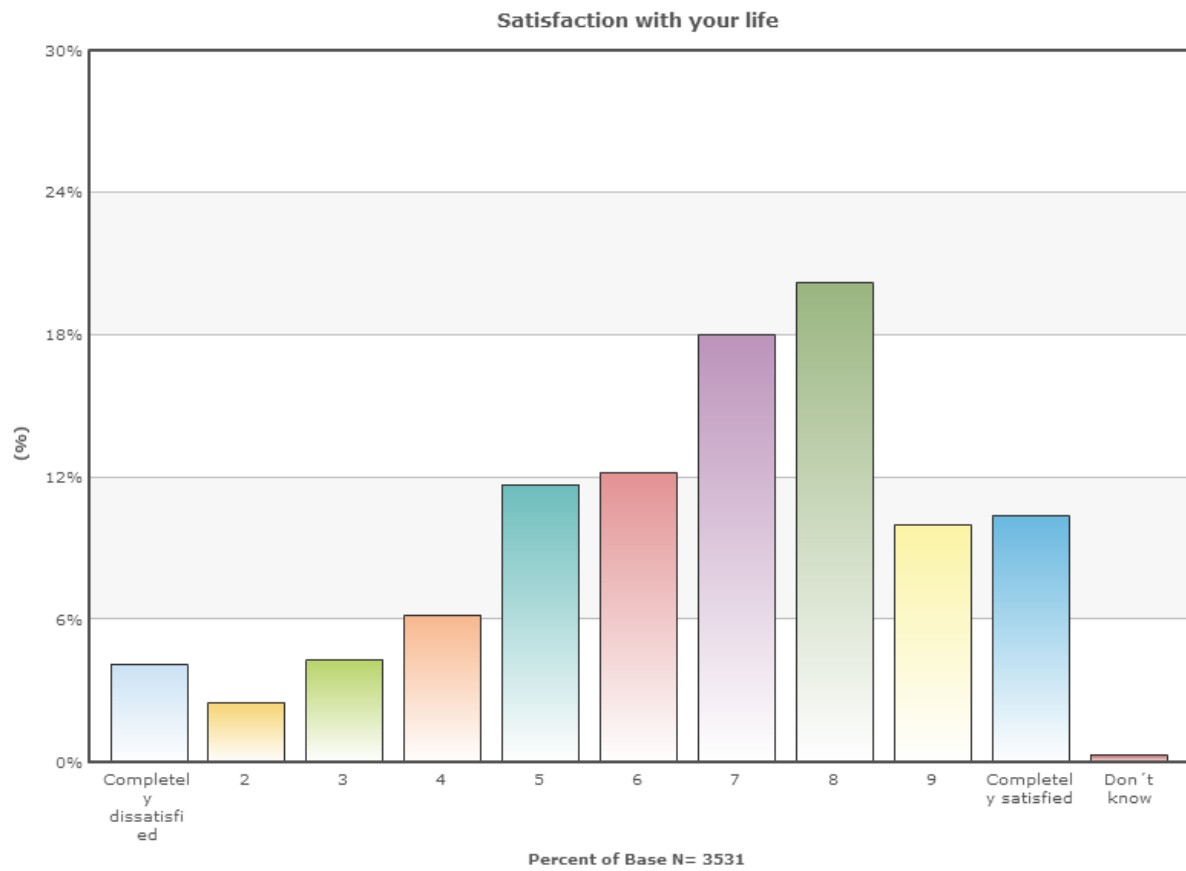
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Figure 1
Happiness in South Africa in 2013



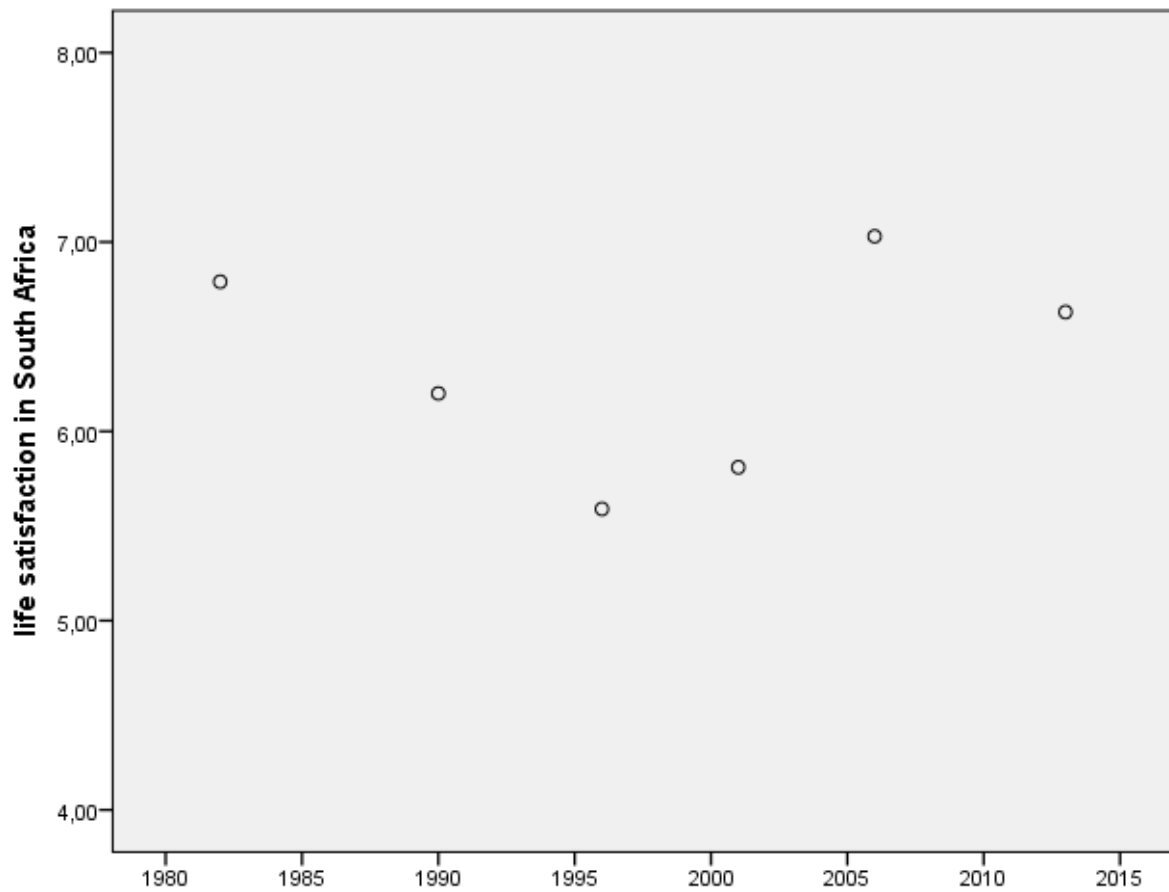
Source: World Values Survey

Figure 2
World map of happiness



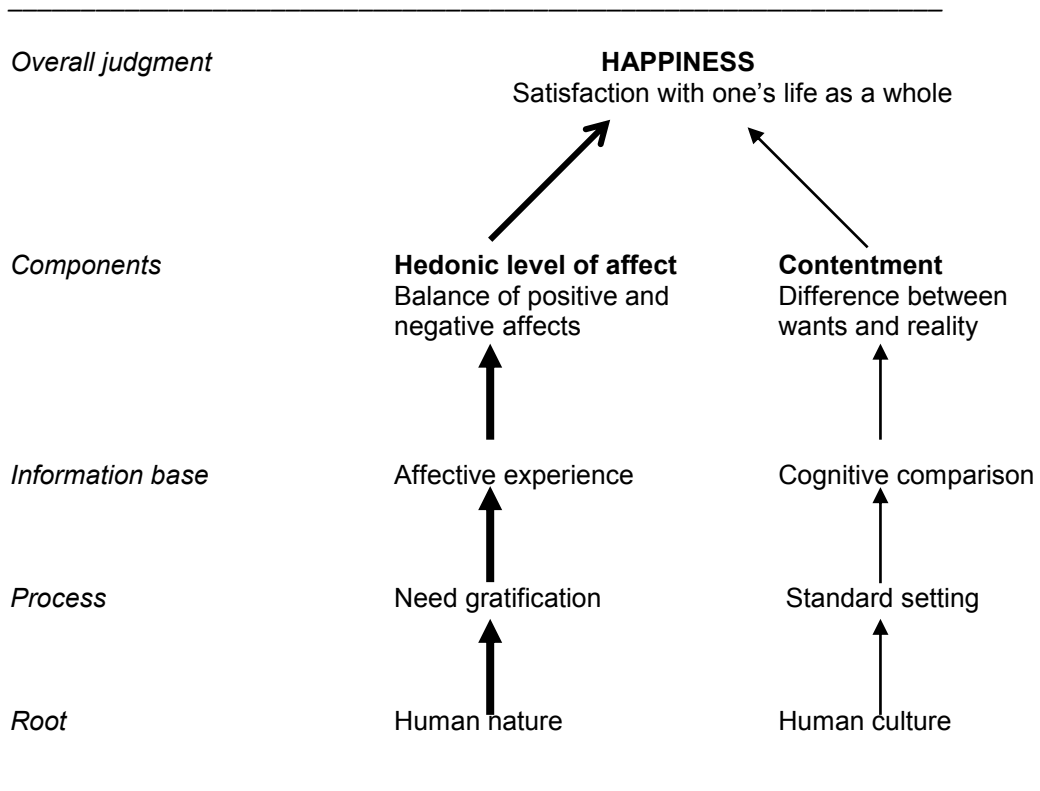
Source: World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2015d)

Figure 3
Trend average happiness in South-Africa



Source: World Values Survey

Figure 4
Components of happiness



Source: Veenhoven (2009)