

On the growing importance of 'art-of-living'

Foreword to: Bernard Schmitz 'Art-of-Living: A concept to enhance happiness', Springer International Publishing, Cham, Switzerland, Social Indicators Research Series, volume 63, ISBN 978-3-319-45324-8 (eBook), DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-45324-8, pages v-vii

This book is about how to live a good life, a satisfying life in particular. The art of living is a topic that has interested man since ancient times and that has figured prominently in classic Greek philosophy. Today the issue is even more pertinent.

Happiness depends on life-ability

For a long time happiness was seen as a matter of luck, as is illustrated by the history of the word; 'happiness', which comes from 'happening'. Today we see happiness as a results of our own actions. One reason for this change of view is that social conditions now allow us more control over our lives and another is that recent happiness research has allowed us to estimate better how much control we have.

Happiness research has shown that most people live happy lives in contemporary western nations; average happiness is around 7,5 on a scale of 0-10¹ and it has increased slightly over the last 50 years. The main reason is that that living conditions are pretty good in modern western nations. Yet not everybody is equally happy in western nations, for instance in Germany some 36% of the population is very happy, scoring 9 or 10 on the happiness scale, while 15% are unhappy and rate their happiness at 5 or less. Though these differences have become a bit smaller over time, they are still considerable, as is apparent from an average standard deviation of 2 for the German population².

Why is there such a difference in happiness among people living in the same nation? One answer is that living conditions differ within countries, some citizens being better situated than their compatriots, e.g. have a higher income or a more supportive family. Likewise some people are just luckier than fellow citizens, e.g. win a lottery or happen to work in a booming industry. Yet these differences in living conditions within countries explain at best about 25% of the differences in happiness in the population. This means that about 75% of the differences in happiness lies in what people make of their situation. We also know that about 35% of the differences in happiness lies in genetic factors, which we cannot change. This leaves us with the suggestion that about 40% of the differences lie in things that are within our control³.

Happiness is becoming more dependent on life-ability

This share of 40% is not a fixed number, it was probably lower in the past and is likely to get bigger in the future. One reason is that the degree to which we are in control of our happiness depends on our life-situation. The better the external living conditions in a society, the higher average happiness will be but the more the remaining differences in happiness across citizens will depend on their life-ability. In the best possible situation, say in heaven, there will still be differences in happiness, say between people scoring 9 or 10. These differences will be near to 100% due to variation in life-ability. Since living conditions have improved over time, happiness has become more dependent on life ability and if living conditions will improve further in the future, happiness will become even more dependent on our talent for living.

A related reason for the growing importance of life-ability is that we have more choice than

ever before: we live in a 'multiple-choice-society' and can decide on many things that were preset for earlier generations, such as the type of work we do, whom we marry and whether or not we have children. This greater freedom of choice is one of the reasons why most people are happy, but it also requires skills to choose. It is easier to follow custom.

We value happiness more

Happiness is a universal value; almost all humans prefer a satisfying life over a miserable life. Yet happiness is not valued equally at all times and in all places. Happiness ranks relatively high in the value hierarchy of contemporary western nations, among other things because living a happy life is very possible in the conditions of modern society⁴.

All this has created a growing demand for information on how to live a happy life and this information demand is increasingly served by scientific research. Two new strands of happiness research have developed recently, 'happiness economics' and 'positive psychology'. This book is part of the latter strand. It describes the current state of the art and presents interesting new findings. It will not be the last book on the 'art-of-living' but it makes an important contribution to our growing knowledge on this subject.

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¹ http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_nat/desc_na_genpublic.php?cntry=636®ion=2748

² http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/common/desc_study.php?studyid=10921

³ Veenhoven, R. (2015) [Social conditions for human happiness: a review of research](#). International Journal of Psychology, 50 (3) 379-391, Section 5.3

⁴ Veenhoven, R. (2015) [Happiness: History of the concept](#), in: James Wright (Ed.) International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioural Sciences, 2nd edition Vol. 10, 521-525,