LIFE SATISFACTION IS MORE A MATTER OF FEELING WELL THAN HAVING WHAT YOU WANT

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ABSTRACT

In assessing how satisfied we are with our lives as a whole, we draw on two sources of information: how well we feel most of the time and to what extend life has brought us what we want from it. Though it is generally agreed that both affective and cognitive appraisals are involved, there is difference in opinion on their relative weight in the overall evaluation of life. This difference is related to a discussion on the nature of happiness; need-theory predicts the greater weight of affective experience, while comparison theory predicts the greater weight of perceived success in meeting wants.

This issue was investigated in a study among the working age population in Finland in 2012. As a first step we assessed whether respondents recognize the theoretical difference between feeling well and having what you want; 51% answered an inconsistent combination of feeling well without having all they want. Respondents also answered three single questions using the same format on 1) overall satisfaction with life, 2) how pleasant or unpleasant they feel most of the time and 3) to what extent life has brought them what they want from it. Responses to the question on how one feels most of the time correlated more strongly with life satisfaction than responses to the question of getting what one wants. This pattern was replicated in various subgroups.

INTRODUCTION

Happiness is defined as the overall appreciation of one's life as a whole. This judgment is presumed to be drawn from two sources of information: 1) how well one feels most of the time and 2) to what extent life meets one's standards of how life should be. These sub-appraisals are referred to as 'components' of happiness; respectively the affective component called the *hedonic level of affect* and the cognitive components called *contentment.*

This distinction was introduced by Veenhoven in his 'Conditions of Happiness' (1984) and has been elaborated in later papers, such as his 'How do we assess how happy we are?' (2009b). Veenhoven theorizes that hedonic level of affect reflects the gratification of universal human needs, while contentment depicts the fit with culturally variable standards of a good life. He holds that contentment may be relative, while hedonic level is not. In that view, hedonic level is a more important

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indicator of how well humans thrive.

1.1 Earlier research

Empirical evidence for this distinction and the theory behind it is scarce as yet. The issue has been explicitly addressed in two studies at the macro level of nations, and there are indications from a few studies at the micro level of individuals.

The macro level
Brule and Veenhoven (2015) assessed whether configurations of hedonic level and contentment differ across nations. They used the Gallup World Poll that involved data on both components of happiness in 133 nations around 2008. The average hedonic level in nations was measured using responses to 14 questions on how one had felt yesterday, from which they constructed an affect balance score (average positive affect minus average negative affect). Average contentment in nations was measured using the Cantril ladder scale on which respondents rate their present life between the 'best possible' and 'worst possible'. The analysis revealed sizable differences in correspondence between the indicators of hedonic level and contentment. Though average affect and contentment go hand in hand in most countries (r = 0.48), there is also a cluster of nations in which people are fairly contented but feel bad (e.g. in former communist countries) and several clusters of nations where people feel fairly good but are discontented (e.g. Latin America).

Using the same dataset Rojas and Veenhoven (2013) tested the theory that overall happiness in nations depends more on how well citizens feel than on how contented they are. Contrary to that theory they found a stronger correlation between average life satisfaction and contentment in nations (+0.85) than between average life satisfaction and affect balance (+0.51). Yet this difference in correlation could be caused by variation in measurement: ratings of life satisfaction and contentment were made on identical scales, while affect was measured with multiple questions on how one had felt yesterday.

The micro level
The micro data of the Gallup World Poll are not yet freely available and to our knowledge no earlier empirical study has involved measures of both overall happiness and its components. So we must make do with a comparison of correlations between pairs of these three variants of happiness in different studies.

Rojas and Veenhoven (2013) made such a comparison using the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2015a), the archived findings of which involve a systematic classification of measures of happiness based on the above-described distinction between overall happiness (O), the hedonic level of affect (A) and contentment (C). Observed correlations between scores on measures of that kind are listed in the findings report 'Happiness: Correspondence of different measures',

which contained near to 200 such findings in June 2011. Rojas and Veenhoven summarized these data as follows:

"Most of these findings concern correspondence of responses to questions about different kinds of happiness by the same individuals. Of these findings seven are about similarity between scores on measures of hedonic level (A) and on measures of contentment (C): the average correlation is +0.45. A similar average (+0.44) appears in 35 findings on correspondence between scores on measures of contentment (C) and overall happiness (O). Lastly 147 findings are about the correspondence between hedonic level of affect (A) and overall happiness (O); the average correlation is slightly larger in this case, r = +0.48. So no difference at first sight.

Yet, the correlation between scores on measures of hedonic level (A) and of overall happiness (O) is probably an underestimation of the true correspondence of these happiness variants. One reason is that most measures of hedonic level are based on recent affective experience (the last two weeks, today), which is more variable than satisfaction with life as a whole. A second reason is that the response format is quite different; most measures of hedonic level are "multiple item" affect balance scales while overall happiness is typically measured using single questions. Consequently we see a larger correlation in the eight studies that measured both hedonic level (A) and overall happiness (O) with similar questions on how one generally feels; r = +0.63 in that case."

So far, earlier research has supported the conceptual difference between overall happiness and the two components, but has not supported the theory that the affective component dominates in the overall evaluation of life. Differences in the measurement of these variants of happiness are likely to have clouded the view of their interrelations

1.2 Research questions

In this study we focus on the under-researched micro level of individuals and address the following questions:

1. Do people recognize the difference between the hedonic level of affect and contentment?
   Hypothesis: yes.
2. Do the two components together predict overall happiness better than each does separately?
   Hypothesis: yes.
3. Which of the two components is most closely related to overall happiness?
   Hypothesis: the affective component.
4. Do the components draw on different determinants?
   Hypothesis: yes. Contentment will be better related to success in meeting the common standards of a good life (such as income) while hedonic level will relate

more strongly to manifestations of thriving (such as physical health and social participation).

2   METHOD

These questions are answered using the "Wellbeing and social cohesion in an unequal society" (WEBE) survey in Finland, to which we added questions on happiness and its components using identical formats.

The WEBE survey is part of the project funded by the Academy of Finland. Finland ranks high in most international comparisons of the quality of life of the population and the functioning of society (Saari 2011, Kainulainen 2014). Finland belongs to a cluster of nations where both hedonic affect and contentment are at a high level (Rojas and Veenhoven 2010, 426).

The WEBE survey is well suited for the analysis of possible differences in correlates of the three happiness variants, since it involves several more measures of wellbeing, both objective and subjective. Objective measures of wellbeing relate to present living circumstances as well as earlier negative life events. The subjective measures are: the affect balance, the Personal Wellbeing Index (International Wellbeing Group 2006) and the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al. 2009).

2.1   The respondents
The respondents are working age people living in Finland. The data was gathered through a postal survey (with the possibility to answer electronically) with a sample size of 5000 during spring 2012. The sample was a simple random sample done by the Population Registration Centre of Finland. The overall response rate was 38% (N = 1886). Majority of the answers (81%) were sent through the normal post and 15% through the internet. The response rate is more or less equal to that of other recent postal surveys in Finland (see Sarpila et al. 2010). The data appear to be fairly representative when it comes to geographic, socio-economic and demographic distributions. A weight variable corrects for a small difference with respect to age and sex. Both weighted and unweighted data are shown in table 1. Weighted data was used in the analysis. After every breakdown the mean of overall happiness is presented as well (in parentheses).

Table 1 about here

2.2   Measures
The WEBE survey involves 192 questions, which cover 44 topics, such as wellbeing, social relations, social capital, negative life events and attitudes towards society.

One of the topics is happiness and involved the following four questions[1]:

Awareness of the difference between contentment and affect

Some people get all they want in life but do not feel very well. There are also people who want much more in life but mostly feel quite fine. How about you? Which of the statements below fits you best?

a. So far, I have got most of the things I want from life, but I do not feel very happy most of the time.
b. I want more from life than I have got so far, but I feel quite happy most of the time.
c. So far, I have got most of the things I want from life, and I feel quite happy most of the time.
d. I want more from life than I have got so far, and I do not feel very happy most of the time.
e. (none of these)

Overall Happiness: Question on Life Satisfaction (O)

Taking all things together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

0: dissatisfied
:
10: satisfied

Affect Balance: Question on how people feel (A)

Does life these days mostly give you a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

0: mostly unpleasant
:

10: mostly pleasant

Contentment: Question on achievements (C)

How successful have you been in getting the things you want from life? Think of your aspirations in fields such as work, family and lifestyle.

0: Life falls short of my wants
:

10: I have got more than I ever dreamed of

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[1] These questions were formulated in English and next translated into Finnish by the project workers. One person translated them and twice the project group evaluated and fixed them into the final form.

2.3 Analysis

Below in section 3 we will answer the research question mentioned in section 1.2 one by one.

To answer question 1 we will inspect whether respondents can distinguish between the two components of happiness. To that end we will consider the non-response to the set of questions (option e).

To answer question 2 we will assess whether the two components of happiness together provide a better prediction of happiness than each used separately. This hypothesis will be tested by comparing the Coefficients of Determination (R^2) of regression analysis.

Research question 3 will be addressed in a similar way; we will assess whether overall happiness has a stronger correlation with our measure of affect than with our measure of contentment.

Lastly, research question 4 will be answered comparing bi-variate correlation coefficients between the three happiness variants and background variables such as respondents' relations to other people and position in society.

3 RESULTS

Respondents rated their overall life satisfaction highest (M = 7.67) and their hedonic level of affect lowest (M = 6.93). The average rating of contentment lies in between these two other happiness variants (M = 7.15). Our sample was picked from the working age population, among which there are relatively many middle-aged people, who tend to be at the bottom of the U-shaped curve of happiness (Frey & Stutzer 2002). From other, wider population samples we know that overall satisfaction with life is on the level 7.9 in Finland (Veenhoven 2014).

Variance of contentment was the biggest (SD = 1.93) and of overall life satisfaction the smallest (SD = 1.71). This difference suggests that average affective experience is a more stable phenomenon than the cognitive evaluation of success in meeting wants.

Table 2 about here

3.1 People do recognize the difference

People are aware of the difference between the two components of overall satisfaction with life; 1802 respondents from 1883 answered the question on the combination of affect and contentment. Only 4% of respondents didn't answer this question. Of the respondents, 39% reported a parallel between the hedonic affect level and contentment, but 60% of the cases found those components were not in line. The most common pattern of difference (51%) is that respondents want more

from life than they have, but feel happy most of the time. Twenty-five per cent combined high contentment with a high level of hedonic affect.

The standard deviation of life satisfaction was highest among people who do not feel very happy most of the time. Within the percentage who have got most of the things they want from life and feel quite happy most of the time, the standard deviation was the lowest.

Table 3 about here

3.2 Together the components predict life satisfaction better than each does separately

Table 4 shows that the hedonic level of affect explains more variance of overall satisfaction with life than contentment does. As hypothesized, these components explain more variance together, than each does separately. The hedonic affect level explains 55% of the variance in overall happiness, contentment 46% and both components together explain 63% of the variance.

These results are in line with the previously observed greater variance of contentment, which can mean that contentment depends more on shifting aspirations and reference behaviour. The difference in variance with affect level also indicates that hedonic affect and contentment are not just two sides of the same coin but different phenomena that contribute independently to overall happiness.

Table 4 about here

3.3 The affective component dominates in the overall evaluation of life

Table 4 also shows that overall happiness depends more on how well people feel most of the time (the affective component: $R^2 = 0.55$) than it does on the perceived difference between what one wants from life and what one has got (the cognitive component: $R^2 = 0.46$).

Table 5 further shows that this difference exists in subgroups of the Finnish population. Hedonic affect correlates with overall happiness more than contentment in every subgroup of gender, age, level of education, socioeconomic status, experiences of personal negative life events, one's subjective position in society and the degree to which a person is materialistic. Discrepancies in correlations vary from 0.1 to 0.16. The affective component truly dominates overall happiness.

The only exception from the previous general profile can be seen within those people who evaluate their satisfaction to be higher than the average. In that highly satisfied subgroup, contentment is a slightly better predictor of overall satisfaction with life than the hedonic level of affects. The difference in correlation is small (-0.1), but in the opposite direction to other groups. A possible explanation is that cognitive accommodation is involved in at least part of the high ratings of life satisfaction (ratings 9 and 10), that is to say, life satisfaction is boosted by lowering wants. If so,

the lower correlation with affect level could mean that lowering of aspirations gave rise to less gratification of needs.

Table 5 about here

3.4 The components do not draw from the same ground

We hypothesized that some of our living circumstances correlate more with feelings and some parts with our cognitive comparisons. According to Veenhoven's theory, the affective component of happiness (the hedonic affect level) is rooted in universal human needs, while the cognitive component (contentment) rather depends on the fit with culturally variable aspirations. In this context we assumed that social contact is a typical universal human need, whereas income aspiration and satisfaction with one's social position depend more on culturally variable standards of a good life. On that basis we predicted that hedonic affect correlates more strongly with social bonds and contentment more strongly with income and status satisfaction.

Table 6 shows that contentment correlates indeed more with positional issues than the hedonic level of affect does. One exception to this pattern is that in the lower white-collar subgroup the hedonic level of affect correlates more with satisfaction with one's societal position than contentment, possibly because of the greater status anxiety in this social segment.

Reversely, the hedonic level of affect correlates more strongly with human relations than contentment does. Only two exceptions can be found. Both marital status and the opinion that no one would take care of the respondent if he or she needed care were more correlated with contentment than the hedonic level of affect.

Table 6 about here

4   DISCUSSION

Summary of results

According to Veenhoven's (2009) theory of how we assess how happy we are, hedonic affect dominates contentment in the overall evaluation of life. Earlier attempts to verify this theory laboured over methodological problems (cf. section 1.1). The new test reported in this paper supports the theory.

First we inspected whether people recognize the difference between the hedonic level of affect and contentment. It appears they do.

Secondly we tested the implication that the two components of happiness together predict overall happiness better than each do separately. This appeared to be the case.

Thirdly we tested the hypothesis that hedonic level dominates in the overall evaluation of life. This appeared to typically be the case.

Lastly we explored differences in the determinants of both components of happiness. We found that contentment is more related to success in the common standards of a good life (such as income) while hedonic level will relate more strongly to manifestations of thriving (such as physical health and social

participation).

The difference from earlier research
Our results differ from earlier findings where contentment was stronger predictor of overall happiness (Rojas & Veenhoven 2013). In the present analyses we used individual level data, while Rojas and Veenhoven used aggregated data. Another difference is in the measurement of happiness and its components. Measures differed in both their time frame and rating scales in the study of Rojas and Veenhoven, while the measures in this study differed only in the kind of happiness addressed.

Our results differ also from the meta analysis of individual level inter-correlations between variants of happiness by Rojas and Veenhoven, in which little difference was found. Still our results fit the results of the few studies in which comparable rating scales have been used.

Further research
So far the best available data support Veenhoven's theory. Still this may not be the last word. Future research should consider more precise measures of both components of happiness. In the case of the hedonic level, repeated assessment of mood using experience sampling and, in the case of contentment, the assessment of specific wants and success in these wants. Another approach is meta analysis of the many correlations between happiness variants in which method effects are filtered away.

5   CONCLUSION

People can distinguish between how well they feel most of the time and to what extent they are getting what they want from life. Their overall evaluation of life depends more on the former affective appraisal than on the latter cognitive judgment.

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TABLE 1
Sample characteristics (N = 1883) compared to Finnish population

Variable	Breakdown (Mean O)	Unweighted %	Weighted %	Population %
Gender				
	Male (7.57)	43.7	49.2	50.5
	Female (7.78)	56.3	50.8	49.5
Age				
	20—24 (7.64)	6.2	11.7	10.7
	25—29 (7.58)	8.6	10.6	10.7
	30—34 (7.87)	8.4	10.0	10.8
	35—39 (7.71)	7.7	9.6	10.3
	40—44 (7.67)	8.6	9.8	10.2
	45—49 (7.74)	12.1	11.5	11.7
	50—54 (7.76)	12.7	11.6	11.6
	55—59 (7.32)	15.2	12.0	11.9
	60—65 (7.75)	22.1	15.0	12.2
Marital status				
	Married (registered) (7.99)	51.6	47.1	46.1
	Cohabiting (7.84)	17.9	19.8	
	Not married (7.12)	17.5	22.5	40.2
	Divorced (7.18)	10.8	9.1	12.3
	Widowed (6.91)	2.2	1.6	1.3
Household				
	Single (7.15)	21.9	21.7	21.5
	Single parent (7.27)	3.8	3.6	4.8
	A pair without children (7.76)	28.1	27.4	29.1
	A pair with children (8.06)	41.0	39.6	33.7
	Living with parents (6.79)	1.9	3.9	5.2
Education				
	Primary school (7.36)	20.2	16.9	18.3
	Secondary school (7.31) or Vocational (7.68)	48.9	52.2	47.4
	University or Polytechnic (7.96)	29.9	31.1	34.2
Socio-economic Status				
	Student (7.52)	6.5	9.4	6.9
	Retired (7.12)	14.4	10.5	10.6
	Unemployed (6.51)	7.6	7.5	7.9
	Blue-collar (7.76)	33.7	34.9	21.1
	Lower white-collar (7.97)	11.1	10.1	25.6
	Upper white-collar (8.11)	15.0	14.8	14.3
	Entrepreneur (7.93)	7.0	7.0	6.1
	Farmer (7.63)	1.2	1.2	1.6
	Other (7.99)	3.4	4.7	3.7

Table 2
Basic statistics for life satisfaction, affect balance and contentment.

	Mean	Standard deviation
Satisfaction O	7.67	1.71
Affect balance A	6.93	1.79
Contentment C	7.15	1.93

Table 3.
Responses to the question: Some people get all they want in their life but do not feel very well. There are also people who want much more in life than but mostly feel quite fine. How about you? Which of the statements below fits you best?

	N	%	Overall happiness	
			Mean	SD
So far, I have got most of the things I want from life but I do not feel very happy most of the time	189	10.5	6.60	1.796
I want more from life than I have got so far, but I feel quite happy most of the time	916	50.8	7.99	1.066
So far, I have got most of the things I want from life, and I feel quite happy most of the time	503	27.9	8.63	.860
I want more from life than I got so far, and I do not feel very happy most of the time	195	10.8	4.99	2.095
Total	1802	100.0		

Table 4
Regression analysis – coefficient of determination (R^2)

	Affect (A)	Contentment (C)	A + C
R^2	0.550	0.460	0.627

Table 5
Correlations of the hedonic level of affect (A) and contentment (C) with overall
satisfaction with life (O) and the gap between A and C.

		A	C	A–C
Sex	Male	0.75	0.69	0.07
	Female	0.73	0.66	0.07
Age group	20–24	0.81	0.73	0.09
	25–29	0.71	0.57	0.14
	30–34	0.75	0.72	0.03
	35–39	0.80	0.78	0.02
	40–49	0.76	0.70	0.06
	50–59	0.71	0.65	0.05
	60–64	0.68	0.67	0.01
Education	Primary school	0.68	0.64	0.04
	Secondary school	0.84	0.75	0.09
	Vocational school	0.74	0.67	0.07
	University of Applied Sciences	0.76	0.60	0.16
	University	0.74	0.68	0.06
Socioeconomic status	Student	0.82	0.74	0.09
	Retired	0.76	0.67	0.10
	Unemployed	0.77	0.71	0.06
	Blue-collar	0.69	0.62	0.07
	Lower white-collar	0.73	0.69	0.04
	Upper white-collar	0.71	0.59	0.12
	Entrepreneur	0.76	0.73	0.02
	Farmer	0.75	0.60	0.15
Personally experienced (2+) negative life events	No (n = 1445)	0.70	0.65	0.05
	Yes (n = 405)	0.77	0.68	0.10
Feeling of being below average population (>3)	No (n = 1353)	0.70	0.59	0.11
	Yes (n = 490)	0.75	0.70	0.05
Materialism	1-3.50 (n = 575)	0.69	0.57	0.12
	3.51-4.99 (n = 760)	0.75	0.71	0.04
	5.00-7 (n = 514)	0.76	0.69	0.07
Satisfaction level	Low (<8)	0.70	0.54	0.16
	High (>7)	0.36	0.37	-0.01

Table 6.
The correlation of hedonic affect (A) and contentment (C) with societal position and relationships.

		A	C	A–C
Marital status	Marital status (single, cohabiting, married)	0.18	0.29	-0.11
During the last 12 months please say how often you have felt …	Lonely (scale reversed)	0.45	0.39	0.06
How often you keep in contact with your friends and relatives that do not live in the same apartment?	Meet friends or relatives face to face	0.11	0.06	0.05
	Call friends or relatives	0.13	0.11	0.01
	Email or chat with friends or relatives	0.09	0.03	0.06
Please estimate the possibility of getting help from your nearby friends when it is needed.	No one would take care of you if something happens (scale reversed)	0.44	0.49	-0.05
	No one would help you in practice if you needed help (scale reversed)	0.52	0.42	0.10
	No one would discuss personal issues with you (scale reversed)	0.30	0.20	0.10
	No one would give you money if you needed it (scale reversed)	0.22	0.21	0.01
People in the neighbourhood where I live…	are helpful	0.30	0.25	0.04
	live together peacefully	0.31	0.26	0.05
	treat each other fairly	0.32	0.27	0.05
	would help if someone in the family was ill	0.30	0.26	0.04
	engage in community volunteering	0.25	0.23	0.02
	trust local government officials	0.28	0.21	0.07
Can one trust people or can one not be too careful in relations with other people?	Do you trust people? (scale 0—10)	0.37	0.29	0.09
Do you think that, generally speaking, people try to use you or people act fairly?	People misuse you (scale reversed)	0.38	0.32	0.07
Do you think most people are helpful or do you think people think only about themselves?	People are helpful	0.35	0.25	0.09
	My health is lower than others (scale reversed, 1 agree, 5 disagree)	0.33	0.27	0.06
Income	Net income (n = 1100)	0.11	0.13	-0.02

	Net income (n = 1100; controlled by age)	0.10	0.13	-0.02
	Enough to cover expenditure	0.28	0.31	-0.03
	Enough to cover expenditure (controlled by age)	0.26	0.29	-0.03
Societal position	Position (self-ranked) within the hierarchy of society	0.50	0.57	-0.07
	Satisfaction with own societal position (SSP)	0.48	0.51	-0.04
	Student SSP	0.53	0.53	0.00
	Retired SSP	0.57	0.61	-0.04
	Unemployed SSP	0.45	0.55	-0.10
	Blue-collar SSP	0.40	0.41	-0.01
	Lower white-collar SSP	0.50	0.44	0.06
	Upper white-collar SSP	0.38	0.49	-0.11
	Entrepreneur SSP	0.40	0.45	-0.05
	Farmer SSP	0.48	0.74	-0.26

STATISTICAL SUPPLEMENT

We performed a robustness tests to check whether people really recognize the difference between the two components of overall satisfaction with life. Both the average of overall satisfaction with life and cross-tabulation with objective life circumstances and overall satisfaction with life showed clearly that the respondents truly recognized the difference between the two components. Overall satisfaction with life was split in two categories, above average (8-10), and average or below average (0–7). Life circumstances were measured with the question "When all sources of your household income are taken into consideration, are you able to cover all of your normal expenses?" The response alternatives ranged from one to six: with great difficulty (1); with difficulty (2); with a little difficulty (3); fairly easily (4); easily (5); and very easily (6). Answers were split in two categories: those who had difficulties (1–3) and those who did not (4–6). Cross-tabulation showed that objective categorization and subjective evaluations were in line.

Table x
Cross-tabulation of an integrated affect–contentment measure and constructed measure (sufficiency of income combined with overall satisfaction with life).

		"Unhappy poor"	"Unhappy rich"	"Happy poor"	"Happy rich"	All
So far, I have got most of the things I want from life, but I do not feel very happy most of the time	N	45	67	13	58	183
	%	*16.3*	***27.2***	*4.2*	*6.1*	*10.2*
I want more of life than I have got so far, but I feel quite happy most of the time	N	102	102	200	510	914
	%	*37.0*	*41.5*	***64.5***	*53.3*	*51.1*

So far, I have got most of the things I want from life, and I feel quite happy most of the time	N	10	19	87	382	498
	%	*3.6*	*7.7*	*28.1*	***39.9***	*27.8*
I want more from life than I have got so far, and I do not feel very happy most of the time	N	119	58	10	7	194
	%	***43.1***	*23.6*	*3.2*	*0.7*	*10.8*
	N	276	246	310	957	1789
	%	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*