

THE SOCIOLOGY OF HAPPINESS

Topic in Social Indicators Research¹

Ruut Veenhoven¹

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ABSTRACT

Happiness was a topic in early sociology and interest in the subject revived in the 1970s in the context of social indicators research. In this strand happiness is defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole and measured using self-report, typically single direct questions. Such questions are now part of surveys all over the world and the findings obtained with these studies are gathered in the World Database of Happiness. Main findings are: 1) most people are happy, 2) average happiness in nations is rising, 3) inequality in happiness is decreasing and 4) differences in happiness within nations are more a matter of individual life-ability than of social position. These findings are hardly acknowledged in main stream sociology as yet.

1 HISTORY

Happiness was a topic in early sociology (Veenhoven 2000a). Sociological interest in the subject waned for quite a while, but revived in the 1970s in Social Indicators Research.

Social Indicators Research can be seen as a *rope*, consisting of several *strands*. This metaphor nicely illustrates that: 1) Social Indicators Research covers many topics, 2) these topics are intertwined, 3) topics strengthen each other and 4) that together they are stronger than each strand taken separately.

What are these constituting 'strands'? In their lucid review of the last 50 years of Social Indicators Research Land and Michalos (2016) mention topics such as 'inequality', 'poverty', 'safety' and 'social cohesion'. 'Social' indicators have been used to cover all qualities of life that are not typically 'economic', since the movement emerged in the 1960s in reaction to the limitations of mere economic indicators, which dominated research and policy at that time.

'Happiness' is one of the strands in Social Indicators Research. Below I will add some detail about this particular research line.

¹ Erasmus University Rotterdam The Netherlands, Erasmus happiness Economics Research Organization and North-West University South Africa, Opentia Research Program. E-mail: Veenhoven@ese.eur.nl

1.1 Idiological roots

Sociology, and Social Indicators Research in particular, root in the view that human society can be improved using scientific knowledge. This view emerged in the 18th century as part of the European 'Enlightenment'. This intellectual movement contested several views common in the 'dark' middle ages.

One of these contested views was that society is a moral order given by God, which humans cannot and should not change. Enlightened thinkers saw society to be a result of human contracts, which can be revised and should be changed if these appear to involve undesirable consequences. Taking a, still prevalent, religious perspective, they emphasized a moral obligation to perfect 'God's garden' on earth and to weed out injustice.

Another challenged view was that earthly life is not to be enjoyed, since man has been expelled from Paradise and that happiness will only be possible in an afterlife in Heaven, if only for the chosen. Enlightened thinkers rejected the view of a punishing God and rather believed in a loving God, who likes to see his children enjoy his creation.

A third 'dark' view that was contested was that human rationality is too limited to count on and that we would do better to rely on traditional wisdom and divine revelation. Enlightened thinkers advocated the use of reason and pressed for investment in science and education.

This change of views had a great impact: it inspired revolutions and later practices for 'planned social change' in more peaceful and incremental ways. These changes were attended by a lively discourse on what is a good life and the social conditions required for it. The concept of happiness figured from the beginning in these discussions (Veenhoven 2015).

1.2 Philosophical approaches

Happiness was a main topic in classical Greek philosophy and interest in happiness revived in the 18th century European Enlightenment (Mauzi 1960, Buijs 2007). The term 'happiness' was mostly used as an umbrella for various notions of the good life, which today is denoted as 'quality of life' and 'well-being'. Since most philosophers earned their living as moral advisors, many tended to equate the good life with a morally good life. Founding father of sociology August Comte used the term in a similar way (Plé 2000).

The term 'happiness', from the beginning, was also used in the more limited sense of subjective enjoyment of life, in other words as 'life satisfaction'. Democritus (460-370 BC) was one of the Greek philosophers who addressed this meaning, while Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) defined happiness as 'the sum of pleasures and pains'.

Bentham (1789) articulated the difference between a morally good life and a pleasant life in his consequentialistic ethic, which holds that good or bad should not be judged on fit with abstract moral principle, but by the reality of consequences on happiness, the morally best action being the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In this view happiness should be the

main aim of governments. A present day proponent of this view is Richard Layard (2005).

Though welcomed in Enlightened circles in the 18th century, this view was rejected by the dominating ideologies of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The strongest opposition came from the churches, which preached a principalistic morality based on the biblical Ten Commandments. The liberals of that time also had reservations about the greatest happiness principle; in their power struggle with the aristocracy they preferred to emphasize freedom. The socialists who entered the scene in the late 19th century prioritized social equality. Nationalism dominated in first half of the 20th century when the two world wars took place, and nationalists were more interested in national glory than in individual happiness.

As a result, interest in happiness declined and one of the indications is a sharp drop in the use of the word 'happiness' in book titles after 1800 (Buijs 2007). When I took a course in social philosophy in the 1960s, I found happiness described as a historical concern, not as a contemporary issue. But change was coming, in the bookshops I saw ever more of the 'How to be happy' type of self-help books and 'happiness' became a buzz-word in the media.

1.3 Emergence of empirical happiness research in the 1970s

This renewed interest in happiness in the second half of the 20th century was driven by several factors. One of these is that many of the pressing ills had been overcome at that time, at least in the West. The era was characterized by peace, democracy and an unprecedented rise in the standard of living. This gave way to more positive goals, such as health and happiness. Another factor was the development of a multiple-choice-society in which individuals could choose how to live their life and therefore get interested in what way of life will be most satisfying. The rise of happiness on the political agenda was also facilitated by the weakening of the earlier ideological opposition mentioned above. The churches had declined in power, the liberals and the socialists achieved their main aims and nationalism had lost much of its appeal.

The effect of these long-term ideological shifts was amplified by technical developments and the development of empirical social science research, survey research in particular. Life-satisfaction is something we have in mind and as such it can be measured using self-reports. Hence happiness of a great number can be measured by including questions on life-satisfaction in large scale surveys among a general population. This has become common practice. Happiness is now a standard topic in many periodical social surveys, such as the American General Social Survey. This has yielded a lot of data on the basis of which initial qualms about the quality of responses to such questions have been tested. Though not free of measurement error, these questions appeared to do quite well (Diener 1994).

The first surveys on happiness date from the late 1940s in the USA and were part of public opinion research (AIPO studies, cited in Easterlin 1973). In the 1950s happiness became a topic in research on successful aging (e.g. Kutner et. al 1956), in some studies on family life (e.g. Rose 1955) and in studies on work (e.g. Brayfield et. al 1957). In the 1960s happiness was used as an indicator in studies about

mental health in the general population (e.g. Gurin et. al 1965). The number of scientific publications on happiness started to grow, as can be seen from [figure 1](#). The numbers in [Figure 1](#) are not based on a count of publications that use the *word* happiness, but on publications that deal with the *concept*, however named. Fit with the concept of happiness as 'subjective enjoyment of life' was ascertained by close reading of the texts.

2 MEASUREMENT OF HAPPINESS

As indicated above attention has shifted to happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction; more formally defined as 'the overall appreciation of one's own life as a whole' (Veenhoven 1984). Thus defined happiness is something we have in mind and consequently we can measure it using questions. That is, by simply asking people how much they enjoy their life-as-a-whole.

Questions on happiness can be posed in various contexts; clinical interviews, life-review questionnaires and survey interviews. The questions can also be posed in different ways; directly or indirectly, and by means of single or multiple questions. All questions that fit the above definition of happiness are listed in the collection 'Measures of Happiness' of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2016b).

A common question reads as follows:

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Dissatisfied											Satisfied

Many misgivings have been advanced about such self report of happiness, it has been doubted that responses validly reflect how people feel about their life, that responses are erratic and incomparable across persons and cultures. Though plausible at first sight, these qualms have not been supported by empirical research, see for example Diener (1994).

3 FINDINGS ON HAPPINESS

Research findings obtained with acceptable measures of happiness are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2016a), which currently contains some 25.000 standardized descriptions of research results, about 10.000 findings on how happy people are at particular times and places (distributional findings) and some 15.000 findings on things that go together with more and less happiness

(correlational findings). This findings archive is available on the web at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl> Some illustrative findings are:

3.1 Most people are happy

The earliest investigations on happiness took place in modern western nations and observed that most people were happy. This appeared not only in responses to questions about life satisfaction, but also in measures of daily mood, such as the Bradburn (1969) Affect Balance Scale.

Responses are not so positive in all countries of the world, but still the average is above neutral in most of day's nations. This can be seen in [figure 1](#), in which average happiness in nations all over the world is presented. Of the 148 nations on this map 37 score lower than 5 on scale 0-10, while average happiness is 7 or higher in 35 nations. See [Figure 2](#). The world average weighted by population size was 60; standard deviation was 0.9.

3.2 Average happiness is rising

Since the 1970s happiness has been periodically assessed in most western nations. Comparison over time shows an upward trend in most of these nations and few cases of decline. Trend data on non-western nations are less abundant, but show greater gains in happiness. This rise in average happiness appears to be linked to economic growth, which goes against the famous 'Easterlin paradox' (Easterlin 1974; Veenhoven & Vergunst 2014). Life-expectancy has also risen considerably in this era and this means that this generation has witnessed an unprecedented rise in 'happy life years'. Americans gained 5,2 happy life-years between 1973 and 2010 and Western Europeans about 3,6 happy life years.

3.3 Inequality in happiness is going down

This rise in average happiness has been accompanied by a reduction of the dispersion of happiness in the general public, which manifests in a lowering of standard deviations over time (Veenhoven 2016d). This reduction is partly due to the rising average that causes a concentration of responses at the top of the scale, but not entirely. The lowering of inequality in happiness is also due to a reduction in unhappy responses.

3.4 Strong impact of *kind of society*

Average happiness differs widely across nations (cf. [Figure 2](#)). There appears to be a pattern in these differences. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that combine a good material standard of living with good governance, freedom and a climate of tolerance. Together, such societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in average happiness across nations (Ott 2005). There are also societal characteristics that appeared to be unrelated to average happiness of citizens. This

is the case for income inequality in nations (Berg & Veenhoven 2010) and for state welfare effort (Veenhoven 2000b).

3.5 Little impact of *place in society*

Several surveys on happiness have been done in the context of marketing research for the welfare state and aimed at identifying client groups. Investigators expected social deprivation to be accompanied by unhappiness, which would legitimize policy intervention. Yet they found little correlation between happiness and income position and between happiness and the level of education of an individual. Together, social positional variables explain at best 10% of the differences in happiness found within nations³. At least in modern affluent nations, happiness depends far more on embedding in intimate networks and on psychological characteristics (e.g. Headey & Wearing 1992).

4 RECEPTION IN SOCIOLOGY

There are good reasons to expect that these findings would attract considerable attention in sociology. One reason is that the subject was on the agenda of the 19th century founding fathers of sociology, such as Auguste Comte (Plé 2000) and Herbert Spencer (1857). Another reason to expect avid interest is that these findings involve answers to long-standing questions in sociology, the finding that most people are happy is indicative of how livable modern society is; the finding that happiness is rising embodies an answer to the question of social progress; the finding that inequality in happiness is going down is telling about the relevance of 'new' social inequalities and the finding that happiness differs so much across kinds of societies is highly relevant in the debate of what a good society is like.

Still another reason to expect close attention is that some of the findings flatly contradict some common beliefs. The finding that inequality of happiness has diminished during the last decades contradicts the common notion that inequality is rising in modern societies. Likewise, the finding that income inequality in nations is unrelated to average happiness contradicts the commonly held belief that socio-economic disparities cause deep frustration. The same holds for the finding that the effects of income and education are small.

Yet the reality is that these findings are not acknowledged in sociology. Happiness is absent in current sociological textbooks and dictionaries. While the subject has been picked up in psychology and economics it is still marginal in sociological journals, with the exception of the niche journal 'Social Indicators Research'.

This has several reasons: One reason is professional bias, most sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems and are therefore not apt to see that people flourish. Another reason is ideological: many sociologists are 'critical' of modern society and can therefore hardly imagine that people thrive in these conditions.

Lastly, some sociological theories play them false, in particular cognitive theories implying that happiness is relative (Veenhoven, 2014).

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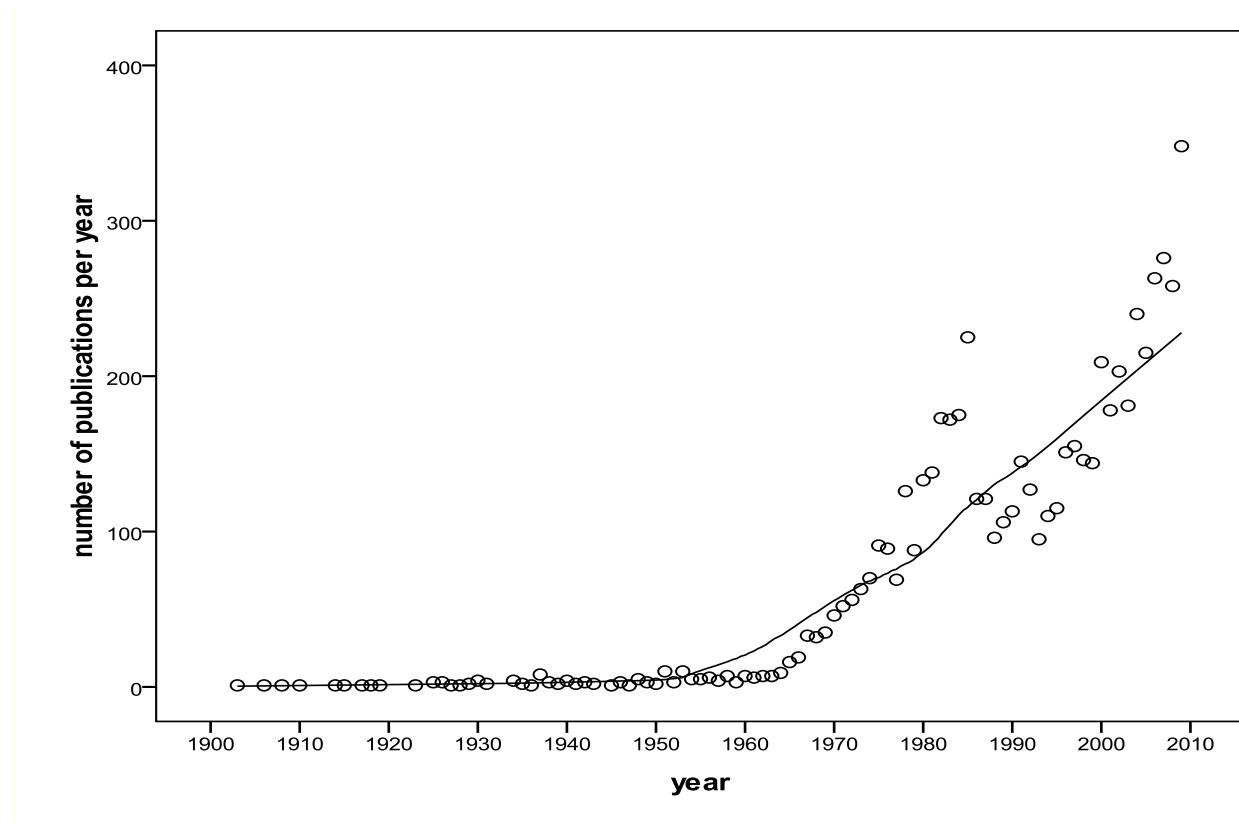
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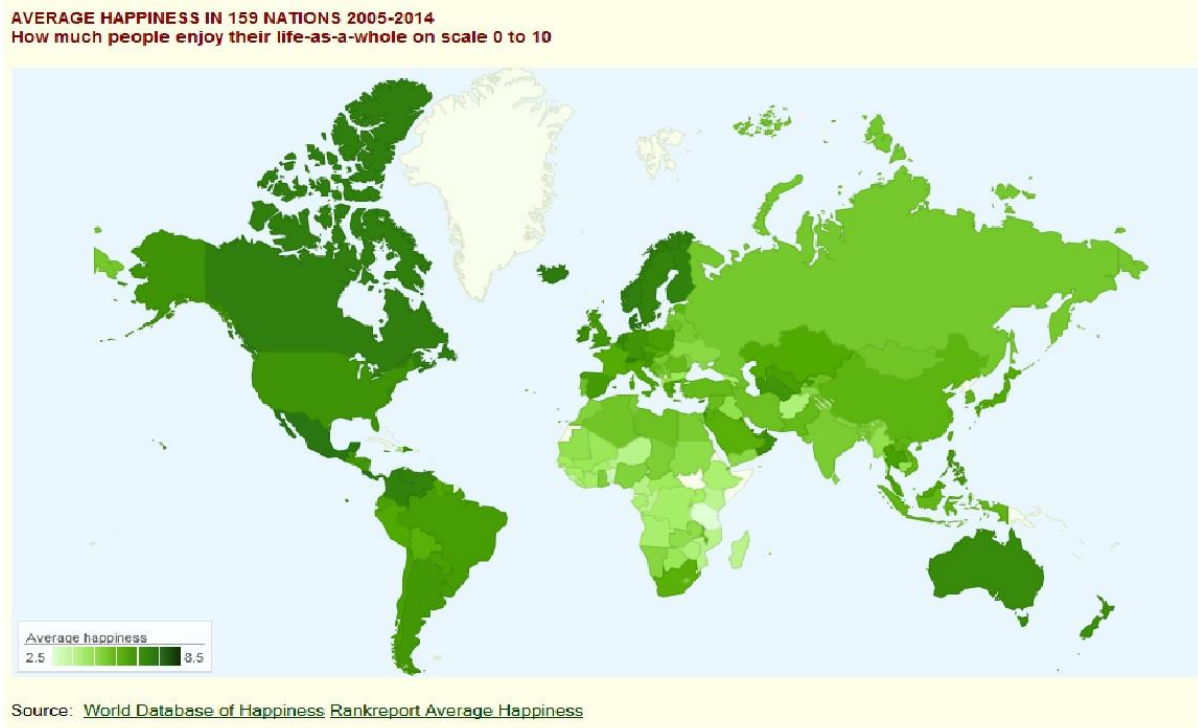
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Figure 1
Number of scientific publications on happiness over time



Source: Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven 2016b)

Figure 2
Happiness in Nations



Source: World Database of Happiness: Happiness in Nations (Veenhoven 2016c)

ⁱ Part of this text are taken from earlier publications, in particular Veenhoven 2014 and Veenhoven 2017