

## How I wandered into Quality-Of-Life Research

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### **How I wandered into quality of life research**

I have spent much of my lifetime studying happiness. Why? It all started during my studies in sociology in the 1960s, when my interest was triggered by the political situation of the time and by personal experiences.

#### *Political cues*

During my student years, the flower-power movement emerged, hand-in-hand with student protests, such as those against the Vietnam war and nuclear missiles. Many of my fellow students started smoking pot, had posters of Che Guevara in their rooms and believed that life was better in the communist East than in capitalist Western society. I was surprised by their ideological blindness for the shadow side of communism, which was already apparent even in those days and in particular because students of sociology are trained to separate facts from belief. Therefore, I looked for facts about the quality of life in the communist East and the capitalist West, and in that context searches for data about how happy people are in these societies. I did find some public opinion polls about life-satisfaction in western countries, which were typically more positive than my radical fellow students expected them to be. I did not find any such data from the communist world and wondered why this type of data was not made available there: was it being gathered at all or was it not published?

In that era, I also witnessed the first wave of the limits-to-growth movement, which in my country resulted in the political slogan 'more well-being rather than more wealth'. The term 'well-being' figured prominently in the programs of the political parties of the time and this resulted in the establishment of a ministry of well-being. In the leftish political climate of those days, 'well-being' was seen as providing things that cannot be found for sale on the market, in particular public goods, such as libraries and sports facilities. The newly established Dutch wellbeing ministry set out to distribute subsidies required for these amenities. Though I welcomed these things as such, I saw little difference between these facilities and material 'wealth'. The political focus was still on delivering goods and services, the only difference being that these were purchased from the shop of Father State and paid for using tax money. In my view, the focus should not have been on well-*being*, but on well-*feeling* and should government provide things that make people feel well rather than decide a-priory what is good for them. I took this idea from a class in social philosophy

where I heard about 'utilitarianism', a moral philosophy that holds that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number of people. Doing so requires that we know what makes most people happy, another reason for me to look for facts about happiness.

### *Personal cues*

I was not particularly happy during my adolescence and during compulsory military service years, but I came to enjoy life very much during my university years. This made me aware that our happiness can change. At the same time, I saw that several of my fellow students were not happy, some of them were depressive or were suffering from other mental health problems and I heard about cases of suicide among students. This made me wonder why individual happiness can differ so much in the same favorable conditions. This spurred an interest in psychology.

I had planned a career in the civil service but stayed on at university. I had tasted academic life as a student-assistant and enjoyed it. Coupled with this, I was involved in the establishment of abortion-clinics in my country, promoting women's right to control their own fertility. At the time of my graduation, this was a too politically 'hot' an activity for a state employee. Therefore, I accepted an offer to become an assistant professor in social psychology at my Alma Mater and this allowed me the opportunity to continue happiness research and prepare a doctoral dissertation on the subject.

### **How I studied happiness**

Students have to write papers and, in the context of a class in social psychology, I wrote a paper on happiness. In that paper, I defined happiness as the subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole, in other words as 'life-satisfaction'. I gathered the available research findings on that matter and presented these in a 'state-of-the-art' paper. Little data was available at that time, so the paper was short and my professor did not rate it particularly highly. Nonetheless, the paper was accepted for publication in a sociological journal and later reprinted several times in books and weeklies. This made me realize that there is a market for knowledge about happiness.

The rest of my working life has consisted of expanding that first student paper, and keeping track of the available facts about happiness. Rather than summarizing how researchers have interpreted their findings, I have developed a format to describe the facts of happiness researchers have actually found in mini-abstracts using a standard format and terminology. The first collection of findings on happiness was published in 1984 in the 'Data-book of Happiness', in which were presented some 4000 facts about happiness observed in 150 studies between 1911 and 1975. This Data-book served as the source for the review study 'Conditions of Happiness', which served as my doctoral dissertation. This book has been widely cited and is still in print. Happiness research took off in the 1980s and produced an ever-increasing stream of research findings. A 5-volume expanded version of the Data-book appeared in the early 1990s and in the late 1990s the collection was digitalized and presented in an electronic format on the

internet. The internet version has gradually been developed into a modern website, which is available at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/> and continues to grow.

Today, this *findings archive* contains some 25.000 facts about happiness, of which about 10.000 findings on how happy people are in particular times and places, called 'distributional findings' and some 15.000 findings on things that go together with more or less happiness, called 'correlational findings'. The goal of the archive is to facilitate the accumulation of scientific knowledge about happiness, such as by keeping an overview on the ever-growing pile of research findings and prevent that findings get lost in the dust of libraries. Using the archive, scientists can easily assess the state of knowledge on a particular subject, such as the effect of material wealth of happiness or the effect of happiness on physical health. I have used the collection myself for a series of review papers.

### **What I learned about happiness**

I started my journey, by reading a lot of philosophy books about happiness, but once I gained view of the facts, I discovered that many philosophical speculations are wrong.

#### *Great happiness is possible*

Several philosophers have claimed that happiness is not possible in the human conditions, because of our inevitable suffering and death. Yet, the data show that most people are happy, at least in developed nations. In Denmark, average happiness on a 0-10 step scale is 8.4. Claims that the Danes pretend to be happier than they actually feel are not supported by the research findings.

#### *Greater happiness is possible*

Several theories have been put forward, which imply that we cannot get happier than we are. One such theory holds that happiness is relative, that is, our happiness depends on us thinking we are better off than other people, comparable people - the Jones's - in particular. In this view, the individual's pursuit of happiness is a zero-sum game, if one gets better the other gets worse. Collective improvement of living conditions will not raise happiness either, since the difference with the Jones's will remain the same if everybody get better. Another theory that denounces greater happiness holds that happiness is an inner disposition rooted in genetic endowment and early experience. However, research shows that happiness can change considerably over a lifetime and that average happiness in nations has risen in most nations over the last 50 years.

#### *Happiness requires a livable environment*

While some philosophers have claimed that happiness is a matter of inner peace, something saints can even maintain under torture, the facts show that happiness depends heavily on external living conditions. Happiness requires that basic human needs are met, such as food, shelter, safety, companionship and respect. Next to these so-called 'deficiency needs', humans also have an innate need to develop their capabilities, they have 'growth needs', which requires environmental opportunities and

challenges. The happiest countries today typically support the meeting of both these needs, providing all citizens with a reasonable standard of living, together with a lot of choice and challenges, such as those found in the workplace and when playing a sport.

### *Happiness depends on life-ability, informed choice in particular*

Philosophical intuition fits better with findings on the personal characteristics that go together with happiness. Happy people are typically 'life-wise' people, who hold realistic views, are not easily disturbed, pair sociability and independence and prefer a life of moderation. Many more life-abilities are related to happiness and what kind of abilities are the most important for happiness differs somewhat between cultures.

A capability most crucial in modern multiple-choice-society is the ability to find a way of life that fits you. This involves skills such as knowing what kind of person you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what kind of activities make you feel good. Finding a way of life that fits you also requires a sense of self-direction and to have a realistic view on the available options in your situation. Today, such skills are cultivated in modern nations such as happy Denmark, but less so in less happy nations such as Japan.

Self-help books can also aid the search for a way of life that fits you, and a life-coach can also assist in that search. With the support of a large health insurance company, I have developed a web-based self-help tool, called the 'Happiness Indicator', available at <http://www.happinessindicator.com>. This site provides the user with instant comparisons with other participants, from which users can see how well they are doing happiness wise and whether otherwise comparable people living another way of life are happier.

### *Happiness has beneficial side effects*

Most classic philosophers earned their living as moral advisors and probably for this reason, they typically prefer the morally good life to an enjoyable life. Supporting this perspective, negative effects have been claimed for happiness, such as egoism and an uncritical attitude. A literary version of this view is found in Huxley's science-fiction novel "Brave New World", which describes a society where mass happiness goes at the cost of critical thinking and moral consciousness.

Again, the data tell another story than philosophical speculation. Happy people are typically more involved in society, they follow the news better and engage more in political action. Happy people are also more honest and cheat less on tax. Happy people are also more sociable and function better as a partner and parent. They also function better at work, in particular in jobs that require creativity and good communication. Finally yet importantly, happiness protect health and as a result, happy people live considerably longer than unhappy people do.

### **How this worked out on my personal life**

I did not engage in the study of happiness to find ways to a more satisfying life: at that time I was quite happy already. Rather I recognize myself sometimes in the characteristics of happy people of which I read about in research reports. For instance, I

live in one of the happiest countries in the world, I have a job, a good marriage, regular contact with my children and grandchildren and I am blessed with good physical health and sound sleep. I know from the literature, that this is partly a matter of genes and good luck and partly a matter of my own doing. I realize that things could easily have panned out differently; an accident on the road from home to work, making the wrong choice for my job or spouse. As I stand, I see myself as a case that fits the general pattern fairly well.

My happiness is more affected by doing happiness research than by using its outcomes. I like doing research and still do it 5 days a week, now 10 years after my retirement at age 65. Doing research keeps me sharp, involves daily contacts with colleagues and students, and it gives me a sense of meaning. Would I be equally happy if I had wandered into another way of life? What if I had become a policy maker as I initially planned? Or if I had drifted into another life, such as that of a therapist? I will never know, all I know is that I lead a life that fits me.

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