CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN HAPPINESS: Cultural measurement bias or effect of culture?

Ruut Veenhoven
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands, E-mail: veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl

ABSTRACT
Cross-national research on happiness is soaring, but doubts about the comparability of happiness remain. One source of doubt is the possibility of cultural measurement bias. Another source of doubt is in the theory that happiness is culturally relative. These qualms were checked using the available data on differences in average happiness across nations. It appears that happiness can be compared across nations and used as an indicator of how well people thrive in a society.

How then can we explain observed differences in average happiness across nations? Much of the difference appears to be in freedom, both in the case of the East-West difference in happiness and in the case of the European North-South divide. Since freedom roots in culture, culture matters for happiness.

1 INTRODUCTION
Happiness is a main goal in modern society; most individuals reach out for a happy life and as a citizen they typically endorse policies that aim at greater happiness for a greater number. Consequently, there is a rising demand for knowledge about happiness.

Policy makers are particularly interested in societal conditions that promote happiness and the research field of comparative research into happiness in nations is one of the responses to this interest. This strand of research started in the early 1960s with Cantril's (1965) seminal book 'The pattern of human concerns'. Forty years on it has developed into a major research field and survey studies on happiness have been done in almost every country in the world. To date (March 2012) some 4500 survey findings on happiness in nations are available in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2011b), which have been used in some 500 scientific publications on happiness and society (Veenhoven 2011c).

Yet, although comparative research on happiness is soaring, there a still doubts about the validity of the reported results. One misgiving is whether happiness can be meaningfully compared across nations, given that measures are likely to be subject to cultural bias. Another qualm is that happiness draws on cultural variable notions of the good life and that any research aiming at universal conditions for happiness is therefore pointless. In this paper these reservations are considered in the light of what we have learned in the last forty years.

2 PRACTICE OF COMPARATIVE HAPPINESS RESEARCH
In order to know what we are talking about, I will first define happiness and distinguish it from other notions of the good life. Next I will consider acceptable measures of this concept and summarize the main findings obtained using these measures in cross-national research.

2.1 Concept of happiness

The word ‘happiness’ is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is used interchangeably with terms like ‘wellbeing’ or ‘quality of life’ and denotes both individual and social welfare. The word is also used more specifically to denote subjective appreciation of life and that is the meaning addressed in this paper. I will clarify the difference between the different meanings and define happiness in the latter sense more precisely below.

2.1.1 Four qualities of life

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix (Veenhoven 2000).

The first distinction is between chances and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. The second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between ‘external’ and ‘internal’ qualities of life. In the first case quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Lane (1994) makes this distinction clear by distinguishing ‘quality of society’ from ‘quality of persons’. The combination of these two dichotomies yields the fourfold matrix presented in Scheme 1.

**Scheme 1**

**Four qualities of life**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outer qualities</th>
<th>Inner qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life chances</strong></td>
<td>Livability of environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life results</strong></td>
<td>Utility of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Livability of the environment**

The left top quadrant of scheme 1 denotes the meaning of good living conditions, in brief ‘livability’. Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and focus on things such as fresh air and scenic beauty. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, public transportation and safety in the streets. In the sociological view, society is central. Livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole and also with the position one has in society.

Livability is not what is called ‘happiness’ here. It is rather a precondition for happiness and not all environmental conditions are equally conducive to happiness.
Life-ability of the person

The right top quadrant of scheme 1 denotes inner life-chances. That is: how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. Sen (1992) calls this quality of life variant 'capability'. I prefer the simple term 'life-ability', which contrasts elegantly with 'livability'.

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is 'health' in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as 'negative health'. Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as 'positive health' and associated with energy and resilience. A further step is to evaluate life-ability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new abilities. From this point of view a middle-aged man is not 'well' if he behaves like an adolescent, even if he functions without problems at this level. In this meaning life-ability extends to 'self actualization'. Lastly, the term 'art of living' denotes special life-abilities such as savoring refined enjoyments and developing an original style of life.

Ability to deal with life will mostly contribute to an individual's happiness, but it is not identical. One can be quite competent, but still be unhappy because of bad external conditions.

Utility of life

The left bottom quadrant of scheme 1 represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes some higher values. There is no current generic for these external outcomes of life. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to this variant as 'transcendental' concepts of quality of life. Another appellation is 'meaning of life', which then denotes 'true' significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler 'utility of life'.

A useful life is not necessarily a happy life; positive external effects may require sacrifice of individual satisfaction and usefulness may appear long after one's death.

Core meaning: Subjective enjoyment of life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant of scheme 1 represents the inner outcomes of life. That is life quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective enjoyment of life. This is the kind of happiness that Bentham\(^1\) addressed in his 'greatest happiness' principle and it is also the kind of happiness that ranks high in the value hierarchy of modern people. This paper is about happiness in this sense.

2.1.2 Four kinds of satisfaction

Even when we focus on subjective satisfaction with life, there are still different meanings associated with the word happiness. These meanings can also be charted in a fourfold matrix. In this case, the classification is based on the following dichotomies: Life-aspects versus life-as-a-whole and passing delight versus enduring satisfaction. When combined, these distinctions produce the fourfold matrix presented in scheme 2.

\[\text{Scheme 2} \]
\textbf{Four kinds of satisfaction}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passing</th>
<th>Enduring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part of life</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pleasure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with parts of life</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life as a whole</strong></td>
<td><strong>Peak experience</strong></td>
<td><strong>Life satisfaction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Happiness</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pleasure**  
The top-left quadrant of scheme 2 represents passing enjoyment of life-aspects. Examples would be delight in a cup of tea at breakfast, the satisfaction of a chore done or the enjoyment of a piece of art. This category is denoted using different terms, Kahneman (1999:4) speaks of 'instant-utilities'. I refer to this category as 'pleasure'.

So, the concept of happiness used here is broader than passing pleasure. Though fleeting enjoyment obviously contributes to a positive appreciation of life it is not the whole of it.

**Satisfaction with parts of life**  
The top right quadrant of scheme 2 denotes enduring appreciation of parts of life. This can be satisfaction with aspects of life, such as its variety or meaningfulness or satisfaction with particular domains of life such as marriage and work.

Partial satisfactions are often denoted as happiness: e.g. a happy marriage, happy with one's job, etc. Yet in this paper the term happiness is used in the broader sense of satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. One would not call a person happy who is satisfied with their marriage and job, but still dissatisfied on the whole because of failing health. It is even possible that someone is satisfied with all the domains one can think of, but nevertheless feels depressed.

**Peak-experience**  
The bottom left quadrant of scheme 2 denotes the combination of passing experience and appraisal of life-as-a-whole. That combination occurs typically in peak-experiences, which involve short-lived but quite intense feelings and the perception of wholeness. This is the kind of happiness poet's write about.

Again this is not the kind of happiness aimed at here. A moment of bliss is not enduring appreciation of life. In fact such top-experiences even seem detrimental to lasting satisfaction, possibly because of their disorientating effects (Diener et. al. 1991).

**Core meaning: ongoing satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole**  
Lastly, the bottom-right quadrant of scheme 2 represents the combination of enduring satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. This is what I mean when I use the word happiness in this paper. A synonym would be 'life-satisfaction'. This is the meaning the utilitarian philosophers had in mind when talking about happiness, when speaking about the 'sum' of pleasures and pains they denoted a balance over time and thus a durable matter.
2.1.3 Definition of happiness

Overall happiness is the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favorably. In other words: how much one likes the life one leads. This definition is explained in more detail in Veenhoven (1984:22-25).

2.1.4 Components of Happiness

Humans are capable of evaluating their life in two ways. We have in common with all higher animals that we can appraise our situation affectively. We feel good or bad about particular things and our mood level signals overall adaptation. As in animals these affective appraisals are automatic, but unlike other animals, humans can reflect on this experience. We have an idea of how we have felt over the last year, while a cat does not. Humans can also judge life cognitively by comparing life-as-it-is with notions of how-it-should-be. I refer to these appraisals as hedonic level of affect and contentment and see them as sub-totals in an inclusive evaluation of life, which I call overall happiness.

Hedonic level of affect

Hedonic level of affect is the degree to which various affects that someone experiences are pleasant in character and this reflects typically in 'mood'. A person's average hedonic level of affect can be assessed over different periods of time: an hour, a week, a year, as well as over a lifetime. The focus here is on 'characteristic' hedonic level. That is so to say: the average over a long time-span such as a month or a year.

Contentment

Contentment is the degree to which an individual perceives his/her aspirations are met. The concept presupposes that the individual has developed some conscious wants and has formed ideas about their realization. The factual correctness of this idea is not at stake. The concept concerns the individual's subjective perception.

This conceptualization of happiness is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (1984:22-25). There is mounting evidence that affective experience dominates one's overall evaluation of life, which fits the theory that affects are the basic orientation system in mammals and that cognition evolved later in evolution and functions as an addition to rather than as a substitute of affective orientation (Veenhoven 2009). I will come back to this matter in section 6.2 of this paper.

2.2 Measurement of happiness

Happiness was defined as the subjective satisfaction with one's life-as-a-whole. Thus defined, happiness is something that we have in mind and things we have in mind can be measured using questioning. Questions on happiness can be posed in different ways, directly or indirectly, and using single or multiple items.

Indirect questioning using multiple items is quite common in psychological measurement and for that reason the first generation of happiness measures consisted mainly of 'inventories', such as the 20-item Life Satisfaction Index of Neugarten et al. (1961). This approach is appropriate for assessing fuzzy mental syndromes of which the individual is not necessarily aware, such as ‘alienation’ or ‘neuroticism’; one cannot ask respondents how alienated they are. Yet in the case of
happiness, the concept is clear-cut and respondents are aware by definition. Hence happiness can also be measured using single direct questions.

2.2.1 Common questions
Some common questions are presented in Scheme 3. All questions on happiness ever used in empirical studies are collated and available in the collection 'Measures of Happiness' of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2011c).

Scheme 3
Some currently used survey questions on happiness

Single questions

- Taking all together, how happy would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy, not at all happy?
  (Standard item in the World Value Studies)

- How satisfied are you with the life you lead? Very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, not at all satisfied?
  (Standard item in Euro-barometer surveys)

- Here is a picture of a ladder. Suppose the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder the worst possible life. Where on the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? (0-10 ladder like rating scale)
  (Cantril's (1965) present life ladder rating)

Multiple questions (summed)

- Same question asked twice: at the beginning and at the end of interview
  How do you feel about your life-as-a-whole? Delighted, pleased, mostly satisfying, mixed, mostly dissatisfying, unhappy, terrible?
  (Andrews & Withey's (1976) Life 3)

- Five questions, rated on a 1-7 scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
  (Diener's 1985 Satisfaction With Life Scale SWLS)
  - In most ways my life is close to ideal
  - The conditions of my life are excellent
  - I am satisfied with my life
  - So far I have gotten the important things I want in life
  - If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

2.2.2 Validity
Critics have suggested that responses to questions on happiness actually measure other phenomena. Rather than indicating how much respondents enjoy life, the answers will reflect their normative notions and desires.

No notion
One of the misgivings is that most people have no opinion about their happiness, and if asked how happy they are, they will report how happy they are supposed to be. Though this may happen incidentally, it does not appear to be the rule. Most people know quite well whether or not they enjoy life. Responses to questions about
happiness tend to be prompt. Non-response on these items is low, typically less than 1%. ‘Don't know' responses are also infrequent.

A related assertion is that respondents mix up how happy they actually are, with how happy other people think they are, given their situation. If so, people considered to be well off would typically report they are very happy, and people regarded as disadvantaged should characterize themselves as unhappy. This pattern is observed sometimes, but it is not general. For instance, in The Netherlands a good education is seen as a pre-requisite for a good life, but the highly educated appear to be slightly less happy than their less educated counterparts.

Colored answers
Another objection concerns the presence of systematic bias in responses. It is assumed that questions on happiness are interpreted correctly, but that responses are often false. People who are actually dissatisfied with their life would tend to answer that they are happy. Both ego-defense and social-desirability would cause such distortions.

This bias is seen to manifest itself in over-reporting of happiness; most people claim to be happy, and most perceive themselves as happier than average. Another indication of bias is seen in the finding that psychosomatic complaints are not uncommon among the happy.

However, these findings allow other interpretations as well. Firstly, the fact that more people say they are happy than unhappy does not imply over-report of happiness. It is quite possible that most people are truly happy; some reasons for this will be discussed below. Secondly, there are also good reasons why most people think that they are happier than average. One such reason is that the salience of misery in the media suggests that unhappiness is the rule. Thirdly, the occurrence of headaches and worries among the happy does not prove response distortion. Life can be a sore trial some times, but still be satisfying on a balance.

The proof of the pudding is in demonstrating the response distortion as such. One way researchers have tried to do this is comparing responses to single direct questions with ratings based on depth interviews and projective tests. The results of these clinical assessments did not differ from responses to single direct questions posed by an anonymous interviewer (e.g. Wessman & Ricks 1960).

General validity checks
The validity of self-reports of happiness can also be estimated in more general ways. One way is to assess how well answers correspond with other indicators of happiness, such as ratings by family and peers, observation of non-verbal signs of good mood and estimates of daily mood based using the experience sampling method. This type of comparisons typically shows strong correlations (e.g. Lucas et al. 1996). In this line one can also look for links with physiological activity in the reward areas of the brain and such links have be found (Davidson 2004).

A second approach is assessing correspondence with other manifestations of human thriving, such as health and longevity. I have reviewed the literature on this matter elsewhere (Veenhoven 2005). I found that happiness is strongly correlated to physical and mental health and that happiness is predictive of longevity (Veenhoven 2008).

2. 2.3 Reliability
Although single questions on happiness seem to measure what they are supposed to measure, they measure it rather imprecisely. When the same question is asked twice in an interview, the responses are not always identical, with correlations of about +.70. Over a period of a week, test-retest reliability drops to circa +.60. Though responses seldom change from `happy' to `unhappy', switches between `very' and `fairly' are rather common. The difference between response-options is often ambiguous and the respondents' notion about their happiness tends to be general. Thus any choice for a one answer-category or another is sometimes haphazard.

Because choice is often uncertain, subtle differences in interrogation can exert considerable effect. Variations in the place where the interview is held, characteristics of the interviewer, the sequence of questions and precise wording of the key-item can tip the scale to one response or the other. Such effects can occur in different phases of the response process, during consideration of the answer and in how the judgment is communicated.

**Bias in appraisal**
Though most people have an idea of how much they enjoy life, responding to questions on this matter involves more than just bringing up an earlier judgment from memory. For the most part, memory only gives a range of happiness. Typically the matter is re-assessed in an instant judgment. This re-appraisal may be limited to recent change: Are there any reasons to be more or less happy than I used to be?, but it can also involve quick re-evaluation of life: What are my blessings and frustrations?.

In making such instant judgments, people use various heuristics. These mental simplifications come attendant with specific errors. For instance the `availability' heuristic involves orientation on pieces of information that happen to be readily available. If the interviewer is in a wheelchair, the benefit of good health is salient. Respondents in good health will then rate their happiness somewhat higher and the correlation of happiness-ratings with health variables will be more pronounced. Schwartz and Strack (1991) have demonstrated several of these heuristic effects.

**Bias in response**
Once a respondent has assessed how much his or her satisfaction with life, the next step is to communicate it. At this stage reports can also be biased in various ways. One source of bias is inherent to semantics; respondents interpret words differently and some interpretations may be emphasized by earlier questions. For example, questions on happiness are more likely to be interpreted as referring to `contentment' when preceded by questions on success in work, rather than items on mood.

Another source of response-bias is found in considerations of self-presentation and social-desirability. Self-rating of happiness tends to be slightly higher in personal interviews than on anonymous questionnaires, however, direct contact with an interviewer does not always inflate happiness reports. If the interviewer is in a wheelchair, modest self-presentation is encouraged.

**Reliability estimates**
Much of these biases are random, and balance out in large samples. In this case error does not affect the accuracy of happiness averages. Yet it does affect
correlations, since random error 'attenuates' correlations. Random error can be estimated using multiple-trait-multiple-method (MTMM) studies, and correlations can be corrected (disattenuated) on this basis. A first application on satisfaction measures is reported in Saris et al. (1996).

Some biases are systematic, especially bias produced by interrogation technique used and the sequence of questions. Bias of this kind affects the reliability of distributional data. In principle it does not affect correlations, unless the measure of the correlate is biased in the same way, i.e. correlated error. To some extent, systematic error can also be estimated and corrected. See also Saris et al. (1996).

3 CROSS NATIONAL PATTERN OF HAPPINESS

The above mentioned questions on happiness have been used in survey studies among the general population in many nations. The first survey of this kind was done in the USA in 1946. To date, survey findings on happiness are available for almost all thenations of the world. All the findings are gathered in the collection ‘Happiness in Nations’ (Veenhoven 2011b) of the World Database of Happiness. The most commonly used question reads:

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

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

An example of the distribution of responses is presented on Scheme 4. This is the case for Germany in 2006, where the average score was 7.2.

Scheme 4
Happiness in Germany in 2006

Source: European Social Survey 2006
3.1 Differences in average happiness across nations

Responses differ widely across nations. Some illustrative results are presented on scheme 5.

It may be no surprise to see four West European nations in the top 5, though one may not have expected average values as high as 8. The top position of Costa Rica\(^5\) may be more of a surprise, yet Mexico is also among the happiest countries. Average happiness is higher than one would expect in all Latin American nations, while happiness is lower than common expectation in industrialized Asian nations, e.g. only 6,3 in China and 6,5 in Japan.

**Scheme 5**  
*Average happiness (0-10) in nations 2000-2009*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top</th>
<th>Middle range</th>
<th>Bottom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;7,8</td>
<td>6-5</td>
<td>&lt;3,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>8,5</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>8,3</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>8,2</td>
<td>Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>8,0</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland, Mexico, Norway</td>
<td>7,9</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Veenhoven 2011d)

3.2 Change in average happiness over time

Though it is commonly assumed that we do not get any happier (Easterlin 1974), the available data show that average happiness has increased in most modern nations over the last 40 years. See scheme 6. Note that Denmark is among the countries where happiness has increased. The Danes were already quite happy in the 1970’s and have gained about half a point on the 0-10 scale since. This means that even greater gains are possible in other nations.

**Scheme 6**  
*Change in average happiness in nations 1970-2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Up significant increase</th>
<th>Stable no significant change</th>
<th>Down significant decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>+0,63</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>+0,55</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>+0,55</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxemburg</td>
<td>+0,41</td>
<td>West-Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of society</td>
<td>correlation with happiness</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affluence</strong></td>
<td>+.69</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rule of law</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Civil rights</td>
<td>+.50</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corruption</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freedom</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economical</td>
<td>+.63</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political</td>
<td>+.53</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal</td>
<td>+.41</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Income inequality</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gender inequality</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pluriformity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• % Migrants</td>
<td>+.29</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tolerance of minorities</td>
<td>+.49</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modernity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Schooling</td>
<td>+.56</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Urbanization</td>
<td>+.58</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explained variance (Adjusted $R^2$) 75%

Source: Veenhoven 2011f

Much of the above mentioned correlates of average happiness are part of the ‘modernity’ syndrome. Hence, similar patterns emerge if we consider further indicators of modernity, such as urbanization, industrialization, informatisation and
individualization. The more modern the country, the happier its citizens are. This finding will be a surprise to prophets of doom, who associate modernity with anomie and alienation. Though modernization may involve problems, its benefits are clearly greater (Veenhoven 2005).

4 REALITY VALUE OF THE DIFFERENCES
Some validity tests

What do these differences mean? Is life really more enjoyable in modern nations such as Denmark than in 'underdeveloped' nations such as Togo? Or are the differences due to cultural measurement error? Below I will check the validity of these differences in two ways; first I will consider the evidence for some specific distortions (section 4.1) and next I will report some global validity checks in section 4.2.

4.1 Tests of specific distortions

Several suggestions have been made about possible sources of measurement distortion. The first is that translation plays us false, since words like ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfaction’ have subtly different connotations in various languages. Similar questions would therefore measure different matters. A second suggestion is that responses are systematically distorted by desirability bias. In countries where happiness ranks high as a value, people will be more inclined to overstate their appreciation of life. A third claim is that response styles distort the picture. It is suggested that in collectivist societies people tend to present themselves as ‘average’, which leads to lower happiness scores. Finally, a common suggestion is that happiness is a typical Western concept. Unfamiliarity with the concept in non-western cultures is seen to result in low ratings. I will inspect these claims one by one below.

4.1.1 Differences a matter of language?

The first claim is that the differences in reported happiness between countries result largely from variations in the meaning of key terms used in questions in different languages. Translations can be imprecise. Consequently seemingly identical questions will tap different things.

If this claim is true we can expect the following: One: the pattern of difference must vary with the keyword used, countries that score high on a question that uses the word 'happiness' can rank low on questions that refer to 'satisfaction' with life, or score middle on a rating between 'best/worst' possible life. Two: in bi-lingual countries, ratings of happiness must differ between linguistic categories. Ratings must be more close to same-language populations abroad, than to different-language compatriots. Three: average happiness must be highly similar in nations where the same language is spoken, even if these nations differ considerably in other respects.

Keyword does not matter

Prediction one can be checked by comparing the happiness rank orders of countries on different happiness questions. For this purpose the Gallup/Kettering world survey was used. This cross-national study involves three questions on happiness that were posed in 11 mono-lingual nations. Questions and data are presented in scheme 8.
that show that the rank order of happiness is largely the same for all three questions. Though there are some minor differences, high positive rank order correlations emerge. Rank order correlations may over-emphasize slight differences between countries at the same level of happiness. Therefore, we also computed product moment correlations (r). These are respectively +.88 (Best/Worst by Happy), +.89 (Happy by Satisfied) and +.99 (Best/Worst by Satisfied). One could interpret these data as showing that the word 'happy' is less easily used in Germanic languages. Germany ranks relatively low on the happiness item, however, this is not a general pattern in languages of German origin. The difference does not appear in the results of the World Value Studies in 1980 and 1990, in particular not when the Netherlands and Iceland are considered. The data do not support the common idea that having the English language involves easier use of the term 'happy'.

Scheme 8
Happiness rank order of nations on three survey questions: 11 nations circa 1975

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Happiness question</th>
<th>satisfaction-with-life</th>
<th>best/worst possible life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2/3/4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>2/3/4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2/3/4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Germany</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Veenhoven 2011b

Little difference in bi-lingual nations
Prediction two can be tested on two cases: Belgium and Canada. In Belgium two languages are spoken, French and Dutch. These linguistic categories can be identified in the data of the Eurobarometer surveys, which allow a specification of regions within the country. The scores can be compared with those of France and the Netherlands, which are also involved in the Eurobarometer survey. In Canada, French and English are spoken. Data on level of happiness in these categories are available from Blishen and Atkinson (1980). These scores can be compared with those for France and Britain from the Gallup/Kettering world survey (Gallup 1976).

Results presented in scheme 9 shows slight support for the prediction in the case of Belgium. French speaking Belgians report somewhat less happiness than their Dutch speaking compatriots. This difference is in the same direction as the, much greater, difference in average happiness between France and the Netherlands. The case of Canada is contrary to the prediction however. French Canadians report
themselves slightly happier than English speaking Canadians, while average happiness in France is markedly lower than that of the English speaking nations. Inglehart (1977) reports similar results in the case of Switzerland. The Swiss of all tongues report relatively high levels of satisfaction with life. Their scores rank far above the Germans, French and Italians, with whom the Swiss share their languages.

**Scheme 9**
**Happiness in bi-lingual nations**
*Compared to happiness in neighboring countries bi-lingual countries with the same language*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>French (3.2)</th>
<th>Holland (3.3)</th>
<th>England (8.6)</th>
<th>USA (8.6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- French</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dutch</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: "On the whole, are you very satisfied (4), fairly satisfied (3), not very satisfied (2), or not at all satisfied (1) with the life you lead?"

**Scheme 10**
**Happiness in nations where the same language is spoken**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Veenhoven 2011b: table 1.2.1b and 1.2.2.b.

**Sizable differences in average happiness in same-language nations**
Prediction three can be checked by comparing English language nations (Britain, Australia, Canada, USA), Portuguese language nations (Portugal, Brazil), Spanish language nations (Spain, Mexico) and German language nations (former East Germany and West Germany). Data are presented in scheme 10.

Average happiness appears to quite similar in the English speaking nations, though not identical, with the UK lagging behind. A comparison of happiness in Portugal and Brazil shows greater happiness in the latter nation. Likewise happiness seems to be higher in Mexico than in same tongued Spain. The case of East and West Germany also shows similar sizable differences in average happiness in nations of the same language. This difference was even more pronounced in the first years after the re-unification of Germany, when living conditions still differed markedly between East and West Germany. Average happiness was about one point lower in East Germany than in West Germany at that time.
4.1.2 Differences a matter of desirability bias?

The second claim to be tested is that part of the difference in self-reported happiness between countries results from differences in moral appreciation of happiness. In countries where happiness is regarded as morally desirable, people would be apt to over-report their satisfaction with life, both for reasons of ego-defense and social presentation. This claim is often raised to discount the high level of reported happiness in the USA (e.g. by Ostroot & Snyder 1985).

This distortion will manifest more pronouncedly in responses to questions about ‘general life satisfaction’ than in reports of ‘how one has felt yesterday’. Reports on recent feelings are probably less vulnerable for desirability distortion, because it is less embarrassing to say one has felt down lately, than to admit one’s life-as-a-whole is unsatisfactory. Recent feelings are also more difficult to deny; defense mechanisms have a better chance in the less palpable evaluation of life-as-a-whole. As a result we should see much divergence between reported happiness and affect level as measured by the balance of positive and negative affects in the previous day. For the same reason there will also be divergence between happiness and affect on the individual level. Desirability pressures produce uniformly high reports of happiness, whereas reports of affect remain closer to reality and are more variable. This must manifest in small correlations between reports of these happiness variants; in particularly in countries that cherish happiness, such as the USA.

Strong correlation between global happiness and affect balance across nations

The World Database of Happiness contains data 130 nations in which both overall life-satisfaction and affect balance have been assessed. The measure of affect balance is based on responses to 14 questions about experiences during the previous day, such as ‘Did you feel well rested yesterday? Yes or no? Average scores on both measures of happiness appear to be strongly correlated $r = +.52$. Yet the correlation is not perfect, there are some deviant cases in African countries, where affect is high relative to life-satisfaction and in former communist Eastern European countries where affect is low relative to life satisfaction. Life-satisfaction

- Canada 7.8
- UK 7.1
- USA 7.4

German
- East Germany 6.5
- West Germany 7.0

Portuguese
- Brazil 7.5
- Portugal 5.7

Spanish
- Mexico 7.9
- Peru 6.2
- Spain 7.2

Source: Veenhoven 2011b
and affect balance are more in line in Asia, where both fall in the middle range and in Western Europe, where both are high (Rojas & Veenhoven, 2012).

4.1.3 Differences due to response style?
The third claim holds that in collectivistic societies, such as Japan, people will tend to present themselves as 'average' citizens. Therefore, they will respond modestly and be apt to choose the midpoint of the response scale. This will lead to relatively low scores, because happiness is typically above neutral. By choosing the (neutral) midpoint of the scale, collectivistic people will avow themselves less happy than they are (Ijima, 1982). In individualistic societies, people are seen to define themselves on difference with others, or orientate on internal cues.

If this claim is true, average happiness must be lower in collectivistic countries than in individualistic ones. This is indeed the case (Veenhoven 1999), but that does not necessarily signify cultural measurement bias, since the difference can also be due to differences in livability of cultures, collectivism fitting human nature less well. Another implication would seem that the dispersion of happiness in a country, as apparent in standard deviation, must be smaller in collectivistic countries than in individualistic ones, collectivists tending to flock together. Further happiness must be closer to the midpoint of the scale in collectivistic countries than in individualistic ones, irrespective of the average.

Greater dispersion of happiness in collectivistic nations, rather than less
The relation between individualism and inequality of happiness is presented in scheme 11. The dispersion of happiness appears to be smaller the more individualized the country (r = -.78). This contradicts the prediction of collectivists flocking together.

No particular concentration in middle categories
As mentioned above, Ijima suggests that the Japanese tend to choose the midpoint of the scale. There is some truth in this observation, for the 2000 World Value Survey 37% of the Japanese responses are in the categories 4, 5 and 6. Yet this is less than half of the population and about as many of the Japanese scored 8, 9 or 10 (35%). A similar pattern is observed in South-Korea. The data do not show a concentration in the middle comparable to the concentration at the top of the distribution as we see in western nations. The distribution is just flatter and reveals greater percentages of very unhappy respondents.

4.1.4 Differences a matter of familiarity with the concept?
The last claim to be checked is that happiness is a typical Western concept, that is, because people in non-western societies are less familiar with the concept, they will respond more erratically, which will result in greater dispersion and a lower average. If unfamiliarity is indeed involved we can expect more 'don't know' and 'no answer' responses in non-western societies: particularly on questions which use the word 'happiness'.

Data are presented in scheme 11. Again the prediction is refuted by the data. Non-response to questions about appreciation of life is generally low and not lower in Non-Western nations than in Western ones.

Scheme 11
'Don't Know' response to survey questions about happiness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Life-satisfaction</th>
<th>Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>0,2%</td>
<td>0,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>0,3%</td>
<td>0,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0,5%</td>
<td>1,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>0,6%</td>
<td>0,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1,4%</td>
<td>4,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2,7%</td>
<td>1,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average in 84 nations</strong></td>
<td><strong>0,8%</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,5%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Values Surveys, life-satisfaction item, average waves 1 to 4

### 4.2 General validity checks

The total validity of happiness can be assessed against its correspondence with other indicators of well-being. This is called *external* validity testing. There are two ways to do that.

One is to assess correspondence with other indicators of enjoyment of life in nations, such incidence of depression and suicide. This is called *congruent* validity. In this context it also makes sense to compare with indicators of physical thriving, such as longevity. Two is to assess correspondence of happiness with conditions that are likely to be conductive to it. This is called *concurrent* validity. In this case we consider the link between external chances for a good life (left top quadrant in schema 1) with the internal outcomes of life (right bottom quadrant in scheme 1).

### 4.2.1 Congruent validity tests: correspondence with other indicators of wellbeing

Happiness is only one indicator of the degree to which people flourish in a society. Other indicators are incidence of depression and suicide and longevity.

*Less depression in happier nations*

If happiness is a relevant indicator of livability of society, we can expect a negative correlation between average happiness in nations and the incidence of depression. This appears to be the case. VanHemert et al (2004) compared average happiness and scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) in 29 nations and found that BDI scores were negatively correlated with subjective well-being and other happiness-
related variables \((r = -.42)\). They conclude that depression has the same meaning at individual and country level and that depression is an adequate measure of (a lack of) subjective well-being at country level.

**Less suicide in happier nations**

If self reports of happiness adequately reflect enjoyment of life in a nation, we can also expect a negative correlation with suicide rates. This also appears to be the case. The correlation in this set of 52 nations is \(-.40\). This relation is discussed in more detail in Helliwell (2007).

** Longer life in happier nations**

Subjective enjoyment of life is likely to correspond with actual thriving and this must reflect in longevity. There is a strong correlation: \(r = +.50\). Likewise average happiness in nations is also linked to self-rated health, \(r = +.60\).

### 4.2.2 Concurrent validity test: Better living conditions in happier nations

Concurrent validity testing is assessing correspondence with phenomena of another kind, that are likely to be causally related. In this case we can compare average happiness with indicators of the quality of society, such as material affluence and good governance. Reported happiness is likely to be higher in nations that provide good living conditions than in nations that do not\(^6\).

Above in section 3.3 we have already considered the statistical association between happiness and societal qualities, which together explain 75\% of the differences in reported happiness in 148 nations. See scheme 7. So there is a considerable correspondence! Still not everything deemed desirable appears to be correlated with happiness. Remember the non-correlation with income-inequality.

### 4.3 How much measurement bias?

Any measurement involves bias and this measurement of happiness in nations will be no exception. So the question is not whether measurement bias is involved, but rather how much. The above analysis of societal correlates provides a cue.

As we have in Scheme 7 this handful of societal characteristics explains 75\% of the observed differences in happiness. The variables involved are of an objective nature and their measurement is unlikely to be affected by the distortions presumed to be involved in the measurement of happiness. As such this high degree of explained variance marks that something solid is being measured and that the bias in the measurement of happiness can be no more than 25\%. Following this line of reasoning we must also acknowledge that the set of variables involved is far from complete. We have to make do with variables on which international statistics are available and we lack such data on potentially important things such as the quality of friendships in nations. If we had more data we could probably explain some 90\% of the cross-national differences in happiness. What is more: the measurement of societal characteristics is not free of error either, not even the measurement of income per head and this also detracts from the explained variance.

Together this means that the bias in the measurement of happiness is small at best, probably about 5\%. 

18
6 MEANING OF THE DIFFERENCES

There are also misgivings about cultural variation in the meaning of happiness. It is argued that happiness is a mere idea and that the observed differences are therefore of little consequence. The Danes may be more positive about their life than the Russians, but they evaluate their life in a different way and the outcomes are therefore not really comparable. This critique roots in a cognitive theory of happiness. Below I will take a closer look at this theory (6.1) and then present some evidence against it (6.2). Next I will outline the alternative theory that happiness signals the gratification of universal human needs.

6.1 The theory that happiness is culturally relative

In this view, happiness is regarded as a social construction, comparable to notions like 'beauty' and 'fairness'. In this line it is assumed that happiness depends on shared notions about life and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals.

One of the ways this is assumed to work is individuals seeing the glass as half full or half empty, optimistic cultures tending to highlight the positive aspects of life, while pessimistic cultures emphasize its shortcomings. Americans have been mentioned as an example of the former view and the French of the latter, e.g. by Ostroot & Snyder (1985). In this line Inglehart (1990:30) has suggested that happiness is lower in France than in the US, because life was harder in France for earlier generations, and this is echoed in a more pessimistic outlook on life today.

Another cognitive mechanism assumed to gear happiness is comparison with shared notions of the good life. In this view, happiness is the gap between perceptions of life-as-it-is with notions of how-life-should-be. In this line it is commonly argued that the advertising industry reduces our happiness, because it fosters dreams of a life that is out of reach for the common man (Layard 2005). In this line the low level of reported happiness in poor countries has also been explained as a result of exposure to western life-style. Critics of western society see that as ‘false consciousness’ and assume that poor Africans actually live better than they believe.

An additional mechanism that has been mentioned is that we see ourselves typically though the eyes of others and hence also judge our happiness though their eyes. In this view, happiness is a ‘reflected appraisal’. We will be positive about our life when people around us deem us to be well off and negative when others see us as losers. In this vein the lower happiness in poor countries could be explained as the result of labeling: because Africans see themselves lagging behind in the eyes of Europeans, they would define themselves as unhappy, in spite of the advantages of their authentic way of life.

The constructionist view implies that there is little value to happiness, happiness being a mere idea. Since notions about the good life vary across time and culture, happiness is also seen to be culturally relative. A life that is deemed perfect in one culture may be seen to be a failure in another value system.

6.2 Some tests of the cultural relativity thesis
It is beyond doubt that shared notions frame much of our appraisals, yet this is not to say that all awareness is socially constructed. We need no shared notions to experience pain or hunger; culture at best modifies our reflection on these experiences somewhat. Our understanding draws also on external stimuli and on inner signals. The question thus is: How does this work in the case of happiness? The reality value of this view cannot be tested as such, because the human mind is still a black box. Yet we can check its aptness indirectly, when we consider the implications of the theory that happiness is a mere social construct.

### 6.2.1 Pattern of happiness not cultural specific

One implication is that conditions for happiness will be variable across cultures. If happiness is a culture specific construct, its determinants will also be culturally specific. Hence empirical studies on correlates of happiness must show considerable cultural variation and hardly any universal pattern. Yet the available data show otherwise.

**Similar conditions across nations**

Comparison of average happiness across nations reveals a common pattern. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that provide a decent material standard of living, freedom, equality, solidarity and justice. Remember scheme 7 and in particular the fact that these societal conditions explain together no less than 83% of the observed variation in average happiness across nations.

**Similar correlations within nations**

There are also differences in individual happiness within nations, in a happy country like Denmark 5% of the people still rate 5 or lower on the 0-10 and in an unhappy country like Zimbabwe some 13% score 8 or higher. Are the reasons for high and low scores similar across nations? Below I consider some living conditions for which cross-national data are available.

**Freedom:** Not only is average happiness higher in free countries, but within countries individuals are also happier the more control they have over their life. This appears among other things in strong correlations between personal happiness and perceived freedom and control all over the world.

**Social rank:** People are typically happier on the upper steps of the social ladder than at the bottom. This appears in findings on relative income position, occupational prestige, subjective class identification and indexes of socio-economic status. The differences tend to be bigger at the lower end of the hierarchy. Though the correlations with happiness differ in size, they are positive all over the world. This finding fits the view that we have an innate need for social respect. Like other group animals we are hardwired to avoid a bottom position.

**Marriage:** Adults are typically happier when living with a spouse then when single. The difference is around half a point on scale 0-10 and is largely independent of income, gender and age. Again the size of the difference varies somewhat across time and nations but the pattern is clearly universal. This finding fits the view that we are social animals, hardwired to form pairs.
Personality: Cross national research on the relationship between happiness and personality is limited as yet, but the available data suggest that extraverted people tend to be happier across a variety of nations (Lucas et al 2000) and that neurotics tend to be less happy in all cultures. Once more there is difference in the size of the effects. For instance the effect of self-esteem appears to be stronger in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (Oishi et al 1999). Still the direction is the same everywhere.

This is not to say that all conditions for happiness are universal. One notable exception is ‘education’. Although there is a correlation between average happiness and level of education in countries, the most highly educated individuals are not always happier. Correlations between happiness and education vary between -.08 to +.27.

6.2.2 Average happiness is stable over time, but responsive to major events

A second implication is that happiness must be variable over time. If happiness depends on shared notions of the good life, it will vary with fads about that matter and this must be reflected in erratic movements in average happiness in nations, comparable to changes in political preferences and tastes for music. Yet again this not what the data show. Average happiness appears to be very stable over time, at least in western nations over the last 30 years, where happiness has risen slightly without many fluctuations (Veenhoven 2006c).

This is not to say that average happiness in nations is immutable. Happiness is rising gradually in most nations of the present day world, and in particular in successfully developing nations (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006). Happiness is also responsive to major events. Average happiness dropped by more than one point in Russia in the late 1990s after the Rubel crisis. Evidently, this drop cannot be attributed to a sudden change in collective outlook on life.

6.2.3 Happiness of migrants closer to country of settlement than to country of origin

If the appraisal of life is largely determined by socialized outlook, we can expect that migrants judge life differently from natives. Though migrants live in the same society, they will evaluate it differently, because they look at life through differently cultured eyes. In this context, one can expects that: One: average happiness of migrants will be closer to the average level in their country-of-origin than to the average in the country-of-settlement, Two: that this will be especially true for recent migrants and Thre: that among migrants of different origins in a country, the rank order of happiness will be similar to the rank order of happiness among their respective countries-of-origin.

Elsewhere I have tested these predictions in two countries in the 1980s: Australia and West Germany. These countries host a sizable number of new-comers: Australia migrants from Western Europe and Mediterranean countries and Germany Mediterranean migrants. In both countries survey studies had assessed happiness in samples that involved sizable numbers of migrants (Veenhoven 1994).

Average happiness of migrants close to average in country of settlement

Prediction one is clearly defied by the data. The happiness of migrants is typically closer to the average in the country-of-settlement, than to the average in the country-of-origin. Migrants from Mediterranean countries are typically happier in
Australia and Germany than their relatives at home. All were first generation migrants, whose pre-adult socialization took place in the country of origin. Hence, if they had been brought up with a gloomy outlook, they have apparently lost that cultural heritage quite quickly.

**Second generation hardly closer**
Prediction two is a specification of the first one and is thus also largely disproved. Still we can look at the minor differences between happiness of migrants and the general public in the country of settlement. In Australia this difference is little greater among fresh migrants than among first-generation veterans. In Germany the prediction is confirmed; second generation migrants are closer to the average German than their first-generation parents. Obviously this can also be the result of better adjustment to German society.

**Rank-order of happiness in countries of origin not reproduced**
Prediction three is also not supported. In only half the cases do we see that the rank order of happiness among migrants more or less reflects the differences among mother-countries.

### 6.2.4 Happiness is closely linked to human thriving

A third implication is that happiness is of little consequence. If happiness is sheer cognitive spin, based on fashionable ideas, it will not matter much whether it pans out positively or negatively. Happiness is then a petty appraisal, such as a person’s preference for one kind of wallpaper or another; nice in itself but of no consequence for anything more than that.

Once more, this appears not to be the case. Happiness appears to go hand in hand with objective thriving. Follow-up studies have shown that happiness is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity, both at the individual level and at the societal level (e.g. Danner et. al 2000 Veenhoven 2008).

Together, these findings do not support the theory that happiness is a mere making of the mind.

Note that these findings concern happiness-as-such, and not opinions about what adds to happiness. Happiness-as-such is something that we experience ourselves and which we can appraise without the help of others. Though we know *how* we feel, we often do not know *why* and in attributing grounds for our wellbeing we draw more on shared views. In this respect happiness is comparable to a headache: a headache-as-such is not a social construction, it is an autonomous signal from the body. Yet our interpretations of what gives us a headache depend very much on hearsay.

### 6.2 The theory that happiness signals need-gratification

An alternative view holds that we do not ‘calculate’ happiness, but rather ‘infer’ it, the typical heuristic being “I feel good most of the time, hence I must be happy” (Schwartz & Strack 1991)

It would seem that this inference is geared by our most salient affective experiences and that these are typically intense affects. This view is common in
fiction and is more or less implied in life-reviews. Yet research using the Experience Sampling Method shows that it is rather the frequency of affective experience that matters more than its intensity (Diener et al 1991).

How do we assess the relative frequency of positive and negative affects? The cognitive view on affect procession suggests that we compute an affect balance in some way, using estimates of frequency and duration. A competing view is that this occurs automatically and that the balance reflects in mood. In this view mood is an affective meta-signal that, contrary to feelings and emotions, is not linked to specific objects. Emotions denote an affective reaction to something and prepare the organism to respond, while a negative mood signals that there may be something wrong and urges us to find out what that is.

**Gratification of needs**
Why do we feel good or bad at all? Probably because that signals how well we are doing. Affects are an integral part of our adaptive repertoire and seem to be linked to the gratification of human needs. ‘Needs’ are vital requirements for survival, such as eating, bonding and exercise. Nature seems to have safeguarded the gratification of these needs with affective signals such as hunger, love and zest. In this view a positive mood signals that all needs are sufficiently met at the moment. ‘Needs’ in this theory should not be equated with ‘wants’ in the above discussion of cognitive theories. Needs are inborn and universal while ‘wants’ are acquired and can be variable across cultures. Wants can at best concur, more or less, with needs.

**Function of happiness**
In this view negative and positive moods function as red and green lights on the human machine, indicating either that there is something wrong or that all systems are functioning properly. If so, this is likely to have behavioral consequences, a negative mood urging caution and a positive mood encouraging action. This is what Fredrickson’s (2004) ‘broaden and built’ theory is about.

This theory also makes sense in an evolutionary perspective. It is likely that evolution has developed ways of monitoring needs gratification, in particular in organisms that can make choices. It is unlikely that rational thinking is the main path of monitoring, since rational thinking developed late in our evolution and animals can apparently do without. It is quite likely that adaptation is guided by affective signals in the first place and that all higher animals can feel more or less well. It is unlikely that humans are an exception to this rule. Our ability to think rationally has been added to an existing affect system and has not replace it. This can be seen in the structure of the human brain, where the affect system is located in the older parts that we have in common with other animals. The ratio is situated in the neo-cortex, a part of the brain that is typical to the human kind and to a lesser degree to the great apes.

This ‘need theory’ of happiness is summarized in scheme 12. The theory implies that happiness is a universal phenomenon and as such can be compared well across nations. In this view differences in average happiness in nations denote variation in societal effectiveness in meeting human needs. I have discussed this theory in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven 1995, 2006e).

**Scheme 12**

*Need theory of happiness*
7 CULTURAL CAUSES of differences in average happiness across nations

If not due to cultural measurement bias or difference in evaluating life, what then can explain the observed differences in average happiness across nations? We have already discussed several societal correlates of happiness in section 6.2. In this last section I explore one of these in more detail, the freedom factor. Freedom in nations is not only a matter of social organization, it is a cultural thing, which is firmly rooted in values and transmitted in socialization.

7.1 Why are the Japanese less happy than the Dutch?

Scheme 13 shows that average happiness is higher in the Netherlands than in Japan. The difference appears at both ends of the scale; not only more unhappy people in Japan than in the Netherlands, but there are also less happy people in Japan.

_Scheme 13_
_Happiness in Japan and The Netherlands_
What are the reasons for this difference? Not economic development, because Japan does about equally well on this point. The difference is neither in political democracy nor in the quality of public administration.

A main difference is found in personal freedom, as can be seen in Scheme 13. This difference in freedom is part of the wider difference between collectivism and individualism on which axis Japanese society stands out as collectivistic and Dutch society as individualistic. This matter is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (2007).

Elsewhere I have argued that individualistic cultures fit human nature better than in the collectivistic cultures, since the human species developed under the conditions of a hunter-gatherer society that allowed for a lot of freedom, whereas collective cultures developed much later in response to the hardships attendant on agrarian society (Veenhoven 1999, 2010)

Scheme 14
Freedom and happiness in Japan and the Netherlands
7.2 Why are Latin Europeans less happy?

Together with Geal Brulé (2012) I have analyzed the difference in average happiness between three ‘Latin’ nations in the South of Europe (France, Italy and Spain) and three nations in the North-West of Europe: Denmark, The Netherlands and Sweden. Happiness is higher in the latter countries than in the former and the difference is about 30% of the scale range in Europe. This difference appears in rating of overall happiness and in separate measures of its components, that is, on hedonic level of affect as measured using affect balance and on contentment as measured using the Cantril ladder scale.

Again, the freedom factor stand out as a main cause of the difference. As can be seen in Scheme 14, South Europeans perceive more hierarchy at work (68%) and consequently they feel less free (30 to 50%). Yet they are little more acceptant of hierarchy (only 10%) that North Europeans are. In this respect Latin Europeans differ from Asians, who accept hierarchy more, but still seem to suffer its consequences equally much.
**Scheme 14**

*Hierarchy in Northern and Southern Europe*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of hierarchy</th>
<th>Perception of freedom</th>
<th>Acceptance of hierarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practised Power Distance</strong>&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td><strong>Free in decision-making at work</strong>&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt; (scale 1-10)</td>
<td><strong>Feel exploited at work</strong>&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt; (in %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**North-South difference**

| In scale points          | 1.13                  | 0.9                     | 12                      | 0.5                     | 0.14                     |
| In % scale range         | 68%                   | 30%                     | 50%                     | 23%                     | 10%                      |

**8 CONCLUSION**

Average self-reported happiness varies considerably across nations. These differences cannot be denounced as mere measurement bias, nor can they be explained as a results of cultural differences in the evaluation of life. The observed differences in happiness rather denote that not all societies meet universal human needs equally well. Freedom appears to make much of a difference.

---

<sup>1</sup> World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, PracticePowerDistance_1996
<sup>2</sup> World Values Survey, Freedom decision taking in job (C034)
<sup>3</sup> World values survey, Often feel exploited in your job (C032)
<sup>4</sup> World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, FreeLife_90s
<sup>5</sup> House(2004), Table 17.4b
REFERENCES

Social indicators of well-being

Why are Latin Europeans less happy? The impact of social hierarchy.
in: ?? (Ed.) Antropology

Gaël Brulé and Ruut Veenhoven

Anglophone and Francophone Perceptions of the Quality of Life in Canada

Cantril, H. (1965)
The pattern of human concern
New Brunswick, U.S.A., Rutgers University Press

Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings from the Nun Study

Davidson, R.J. (2004)
Well-Being and Affective Style: Neural Substrates and Biobehavioural Correlates
Philosophical Transactions, Biological Sciences, Vol. 359, 1395 - 1341

The Satisfaction With Life Scale
Journal of Personality Assessment, Vol. 49, 71 - 75

Happiness is the frequency, not intensity of positive and negative affect
In: Strack, F. et. al. (eds.) ‘Subjective wellbeing’, Pergamon, London

Factors Predicting the Subjective Well-Being of Nations
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 69, 851 - 864

Similarity of the Relation between Marital Status and Subjective Well-Being across Cultures

Gallup, G.H. (1976)
Human Needs and Satisfactions: A Global Survey

Stability of life satisfaction over time Analysis of change in ranks in national population
Journal of Happiness Studies, Vol. 1, pp. 177-205
*The Broaden - and - Build Theory of Positive Emotions*  
Philosophical Transactions, Biological Sciences, Vol. 359, 1367 – 1377

Gerson, E.M. (1976)  
*On quality of life*  
American Sociological Review, Vol. 41, pp. 793-806

*Well-Being and Social Capital: Does Suicide Pose a Puzzle?*  
Social Indicators Research, Vol.81, 455 - 496

Inglehart 1977  
*The Silent Revolution*  
Princeton University Press, 1977, Princeton, USA

Inglehart, R. (1990)  
*Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*  
Princeton University Press, 1990, Princeton, USA

*Objective happiness*  

*Measuring Inequality of Happiness in Nations. In search of proper statistics*  
Journal of Happiness Studies, vol. 6, 357-396

Layard, R. (2005)  
*Happiness, lessons of a new science*  
Penguin, London, UK

*Discriminant Validity of Well-Being Measures*  

Neugarten, B.L., Havinghurst, R. J.& Tobin, S. S. (1961)  
*The Measurement of Life Satisfaction*  
Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 16, 134 -143

Ostroot, N & Snyder, W.W. (1985)  
*Measuring Cultural Bias in a Cross-National Study*  
Social Indicators Research, Vol. 17, 243 – 251

*Cognition and affect in the appraisal of life*  
Social Indicators Research (in press)

Saris, W., Scherpenzeel, A, & Veenhoven, R. (eds. 1996)  
*Satisfaction in Europe*  
Budapest Hungary, Eötvös University Press

Sen, A. (1992)  
*Capability and wellbeing*

*Evaluating one’s life: a judgment model of subjective well-being*
In: Strack, F. ET. al. (eds.) ‘Subjective wellbeing’, Pergamon, London UK, pp. 27-48

The Beck Depression Inventory as a Measure of Subjective Well-Being: A Cross-National Study

*Conditions of happiness*
Kluwer (now Springer), Dordrecht, Netherlands

Veenhoven, R. (1994)
*Is happiness a Trait? Tests of the theory that a better society does not make people any happier*
Social Indicators Research, vol. 32, p 101-160

The cross-cultural pattern of happiness Test of predictions implied in three theories of happiness
Social Indicators Research, vol. 34 p 33-68

Veenhoven, R. (1999)
*Quality-of-Life in Individualistic Society A Comparison of 43 Nations in the Early 1990’s*
Social Indicators Research, Vol. 48, 157 - 186

The four qualities of life

Veenhoven, R (2005)
*Is life getting better? How long and happy do people live in modern society?*
European Psychologist, special section on 'Human development and Well-being', vol. 10, pp. 330-343


Quality of life in nations, as measured with how long and happy people live in: Joop Stam & Ruut Veenhoven (Eds.), Quality of life & Happiness of people in Japan and The Netherlands, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam in cooperation with NIOD Encounters Series Volume I, pp 16-31, ISBN 978 90 6832 4358

*Healthy happiness: Effects of happiness on physical health and consequences for preventive healthcare*
Journal of Happiness Studies, 9:449-464

30
Veenhoven, R. (2010)
*Life is getting better: Societal evolution and fit with human nature*
Social Indicators Research 97:105-122,

Veenhoven, R. (2011a)
*World Database of Happiness, Continuous register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life*
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Available at: [http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl](http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl)

Veenhoven, R. (2011b)
*Happiness in Nations*

Veenhoven, R. (2011c)
Bibliography of Happiness, section D ‘Happiness and Society’

Veenhoven, R. (2011d)
*Average happiness in 149 nations 2000-2009: How much people enjoy their life-as-a-whole on scale 0 to 10*

Veenhoven, R. (2011e)
*Trend average happiness in nations 1946-2010: How much people like the life they live*

Veenhoven, R. (2011f)
States of nations: Dataset to be used for the cross-national analysis of happiness

Veenhoven, R. (2011g)
*Correlates of Happiness*

Wessman, A.E. & Ricks, D.F. (1966)
*Mood and Personality*
Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, New York, USA
NOTES

1 Jeremy Bentham defined happiness as ‘the sum of pleasures and pains’. He did not limit the concept to sensory experience but also included higher mental experiences such as beauty and justice.

2 A disadvantage of single questions is their vulnerability to slight variations in wording. Such variations balance out when multiple questions are used. Yet a common disadvantage of multiple questions is that wrong items slip in. For instance of the 20 items in Neugarten’s Life Satisfaction Index only some tap happiness as defined here. Most of the other items concern rather conditions for happiness, such as social participation.

3 The collection ‘Measures of Happiness’ limits to indicators that fit the concept as defined here. This fit is established on the basis of face-validity: does the question(s) really concern subjective enjoyment of one’s life-as-a-whole? Questions that address slightly different matter are not included. Consequently, the observations obtained using these questions are not incorporated in the finding collections of the World Database of Happiness.

4 I my view this last item is not appropriate. One can be quite satisfied with life, but still be open for the opportunity to try something else.

5 The score of 8.5 in Costa Rica is based on only one survey in 2007, while the averages for most other nations are based on several surveys over the years 2000 to 2009.

6 There is some circularity in such a test. We measure happiness in nations to identify societal conditions that contribute to happiness, because we do not trust current assumptions. Now we are about to validate our measure of happiness using these distrusted matters. Still, it is worth knowing whether these indicators correspond or not. Common beliefs are not held without any ground. So there must at least be some correspondence. If we do not find any relationship, there is clearly something wrong with one or both. If however we find a strong statistical relationship, we can be fairly sure that both indicators do reflect livability.

7 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject section ‘Personality, Inner Locus of control (P4.58). For a recent cross national study see: Verne (2008).

8 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject section ‘Current income’ (1.2) For a recent cross-national comparison see: Ball & Chernova (2008).

9 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject section ‘Current Occupational level’ (O1.3.1).

10 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject section ‘Subjective Social Rank’ (S9.2.2).

11 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject section ‘Objective Social Status’ (S9.2.1).

12 World Database of Happiness, Correlational Findings, subject ‘Marital status (M2.1). See also Diener et. al (2000).

13 Schimmack et. al. (2002) found that the link between Extraversion and Hedonic Level of Affect is more universal than the link between extraversion and Overall Happiness and suggest that the influence of personality on the emotional component of happiness is pan-cultural, whereas the influence of personality on the cognitive component of happiness is more moderated by culture.

14 World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, variable r_LS_Education_1990.