

WHY ARE LATIN EUROPEANS LESS HAPPY?

The impact of hierarchy

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ABSTRACT

Happiness in the North European is substantially higher than in the South European nations. Only part of that difference can be explained by economic prosperity. This paper explores the effect of social hierarchy. A comparison of contemporary survey findings show that power distance is more pronounced in the South than in the North of Europe. Macro-sociological theory is used to provide an historical account of this difference and it can be used to explain why happiness is lower in hierarchical societies.

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1. Introduction

Life in Mediterranean countries is often characterized by the term *dolce vita* (sweet life in Italian), which carries the idea of a pleasurable life in the sun, with good food and rich cultures enjoyed by friendly relaxed people. This stereotype fits the experience of tourists fairly well, but contradicts with the results of survey research on happiness. A look at the World Map of Happiness (Veenhoven 2010a) reveals that people live happier in the rainy north of Europe than in the sunny south. Why? Some possible answers to this question are explored in this paper.

We will begin this paper by explaining what we mean by ‘happiness’ and how we distinguish between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ nations in Europe. Next, we will discuss the evidence for lower happiness in Southern Europe than in the North and consider the possibility of cultural measurement bias. We will then review possible explanations for this North South difference with a particular focus on social hierarchy. We will show that the more hierarchical cultures of the Southern European countries explains much of the lower happiness. Having established these facts, we theorise about origins of this difference, drawing on macro-sociological theories.

Happiness

The word ‘happiness’ is used in many ways. This paper is about happiness in the sense of ‘life satisfaction’. Following Veenhoven (1984) we define happiness as *the degree to which someone evaluates the overall quality of his or her present ‘life as a whole’ positively*. In other words, how much one likes the life one lives.

When appraising how much we like our life, we draw on two sources of information: how well we feel generally, and how well our life-as-it-is meets our standards of how-life-should-be. These sub-appraisals are referred to as the ‘affective’ and ‘cognitive’ components of happiness (Veenhoven 2009). In this paper we consider both overall happiness and these components. Accordingly we measure each of the happiness variants.

Measurement of happiness

Thus defined, happiness is something we have in mind and things we have in mind can be assessed through questioning. Questions on happiness can be framed in many ways, directly or indirectly, using single or multiple items. An overview of acceptable questions is available in the collection ‘Measures of Happiness’ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2010b).

Overall happiness: A commonly used survey question is: ‘Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’, Please answer by ticking a number between 0 to 10, where 0 stands for most ‘dissatisfied’ and 10 for most ‘satisfied’. Responses to equivalent questions of this kind are gathered in the collection ‘Happiness in Nations’ of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2010c). This set of data yields comparable information on average happiness in 143 nations over the years 2000 to 2009. These data are also included in the data file ‘States of Nations’

(Veenhoven 2010d), which we used in this study. The variable name is HappinessLSBW10.11_2000.09.

Mood: The affective component of happiness was measured in the Gallup World Poll (Gallup 2009) using responses to a series of 14 questions about how the interviewee felt the day before the interview had felt yesterday. Typical questions were whether one felt 'depressed', 'stressed' or conversely had felt 'well rested' and 'smiled a lot' yesterday. Respondents could answer 'yes' or 'no'. Using these responses, we calculated an affect balance score per nation, subtracting the percentage of reported negative feelings from the percentage of reported positive feelings per nation. The variable name in the data file States of Nations is: HappinessYesterdayABS_2006.08.

Contentment: The cognitive component of happiness was measured using a question found in the European Quality of life Survey (Anderson et al. 2009). This question reads: 'On the whole my life is close to how I would like it to be'. Answers were rated on a 5-step scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The variable name in data file States of Nations is: HappinessLifeFitsWants5_2007.

North-South

In this analysis of European nations 'Northern' countries will include Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland) and the Netherlands. 'Southern' countries denote the following Mediterranean countries: Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. North European Germany, Poland and the Baltic countries are left out because average happiness in these nations is still influenced by war and regime change in the past century. The South European Balkan countries were not included for the same reason.

2. Are Latin people really less happy?

Let us now take a closer look at average happiness in the Northern and Southern countries of Europe. The differences in overall happiness and its components between Northern and Southern European nations are presented in table 1. There is a consistent difference: inhabitants of South European nations are clearly less satisfied with their life as a whole, they feel less well affectively and are see a greater difference between how their life is and how they want it to be.

Table 1 about here

This difference in the appreciation of life as a whole is paralleled by similar differences in satisfaction with particular life-domains, some of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Cultural measurement bias?

These counterintuitive results have raised suspicion about the comparability of happiness across cultures. Several possible sources of cultural measurement bias have been suggested.

One possibility could be that the words used in survey questions have different connotations in latinate languages than in germanic languages. Yet several arguments plea against this explanation. One is that the survey questions in Table 1 used various words, particularly in the 14 questions about yesterday's mood. Another counter indication is that no such divide between North and South appears in the International Happiness Scale Interval Study (Veenhoven 2009), where native speakers are asked to rate numerical equivalents of verbal response options, such as 'very happy'.

Another possible explanation is that national response tendencies play us false and in this context, Ostroot and Snyder (1985) have suggested that French cynicism results in lower responses to questions about happiness than those given in the US, while both the French and the American respondents may feel equally well. If so, we can expect that the difference will be less pronounced in the responses to questions about yesterdays affect, since this is closer to the respondent's direct experience and the affect balance score does not involve an encompassing judgement. Yet Table 1 does not show such a difference.

Any such cultural measurement bias must reflect in the low correlation of average happiness with objective living conditions, if these measures merely tap hot air, scores on them will not be coupled with e.g. economic affluence and respect for human rights in nations. Yet cross-national research shows the reverse, about 80% of the differences in average happiness in nations can be explained by a handful of objective societal characteristics, see for example Ott (2010). So if cultural measurement bias is involved at all, the bias must be limited. The issue of cultural measurement bias is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven 1993 chapter 5/2.1.

3. Why are people less happy in Latin countries?

Comparative research on happiness shows typically that people live happiest in the most modern nations of this world, see for example Inglehart et. al. (2008) and Berg & Veenhoven (2010). To what extent can this explain the difference discussed here? The most comprehensive indicator of modernity of nations is their economic prosperity, and this is commonly measured using the indicator buying power per capita. For that purpose we used variable RGDP_2005 from the data file 'States of Nations'. A plot of happiness versus buying power in industrialised countries is given in figure 1.

As we can see from figure 1, average happiness ranges from 5,7 (Portugal) to 8,3 (Denmark). The circles highlight the difference between Southern and Northern European countries on both variables; the difference in happiness is great, while the difference in affluence is relatively small.

When looking at the regression line, one can also see that the difference in economic affluence accounts for only a small part of the difference in happiness. Almost all Northern countries stand above the line whereas the Southern countries almost all stand below the line. In other words, Northern European countries are happier than expected when looking at their buying power per capita and Southern European countries less happy than expected according to the same standard. So, economic affluence is only part of the story.

Figure 1 about here

What other factors can be involved? A look in the literature shows that happiness in nations also depends on the degree of freedom societies allow their members (Veenhoven 2000), on the degree to which citizens trust each other (Helliwell 2003) and on the quality of government within that society (Ott 2010). A common effect seems to be that these societal conditions add to the chance that citizens find a way of life that fits their nature. In terms of institutional economy: this societal constellation adds to the 'optimal allocation' of human resources.

Societies can limit individual choice in several ways. One way is by setting normative constraints on self direction. This is typically the case in collectivistic cultures and happiness is indeed lower in nations where collectivistic values prevail than in nations where individualist values rank highest (Veenhoven 1999). Likewise, happiness is lower in nations where men and women have to meet traditional gender roles in contrast to nations where female emancipation has led to a more varied repertoire of life style options (Bjornskov et. al. 2007).

A related factor, not yet considered in much detail, is the degree of 'hierarchy' in a society. Social hierarchy involves differences in power and prestige. Power differences will evidently reduce a person's self-direction, the more power other people have over you, the lower the chance that you can live the way you would like. Differences in prestige will also reduce self direction in a more subtle way: if other people are held in much higher esteem than you are, you will be less self confident and therefore less apt to go your own way. Bay (1970) refers to this limitation as 'psychological (un)freedom' .

Let us see whether hierarchy can indeed explain the difference found in happiness between the North and the South of Europe, and if so, to what extent.

Hierarchy

Social 'hierarchy' involves differential access to power and prestige. Hierarchy exists in all social institutions, though not to an equal degree. Hierarchy is typically more pronounced in institutions such as the army and work organizations, than within in the family and groups such as sport clubs. The degree of hierarchy in these institutions varies across societies and there is also societal difference in the degree to which these hierarchies converge.

Indicators of hierarchy in nations

Hierarchy as such is not easily measurable, at least not at the level of nations. In this study we used four indicators. The first was the amount of hierarchy inhabitants perceived to exist in their country. The second indicator was the degree to which people felt that they were being controlled by others. The third indicator was the degree to which hierarchy was morally accepted. The fourth indicator was the Hofstede's (1994) Power Distance Index (PDI), which is used to depict both the degree of hierarchy actually perceived to exist and the degree of hierarchy deemed desirable. Therefore, this last indicator summarizes the previous items.

Perceived power difference: In the context of the GLOBE study in 62 societies (House et al. 2004: 537-9) middle managers were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: 1) In this society, followers are expected to obey their leader without question, 2) In this society, power is concentrated at the top. 3) In this organization, subordinates are expected to obey their boss without question, and 4) In this organization a person's influence is primarily based on one's ability and contribution to the organization. Agreement was rated on a numerical scale, ranging from little (1) to much (7) power distance. The highest average score was observed in Morocco (5,8) and the lowest in Denmark (3,9). The variable code in data file States of Nations is PracticePowerDistance_1996.

Perceived fate control: Another indicator of hierarchy in nations is the degree to which citizens perceive they are in control of their situation; the less control citizens perceive they have, the more hierarchical their society is likely to be. The World Values Survey (Inglehart 2000) contains several questions on this matter, two of which concern control in the workplace and one is about control of one's life in general.

The first question on self-direction at work reads: 'Thinking of your job, do you often or occasionally feel that you are being taken advantage of or exploited, or do you never have this feeling?' 1: often; 2: sometimes; 3: never. Responses to this question are available for 16 nations. The variable is taken from the World Values Survey (question C032)

A second question concerns perceived freedom at work and reads: 'How free are you to make decisions in your job?' 1: not at all; 10: a great deal. Responses to this question are available for 41 nations. The variable code in data file States of Nations is FreeWork_1990s.

The question about control in life in general reads 'Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means "none at all" and 10 means "a great deal" to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out'. This variable is available for 63 nations and is labelled as FreeLife_1990s in the data file States of Nations.

Approval of hierarchy: One source of data on the social approval of hierarchy is the above mentioned GLOBE study in which middle managers has first rated how much power distance exists in their society and organization. Subsequently they rated how much distance they feel *should be* in their society and organization, in response to the same four topics. Desired distance was again rated on a numerical scale ranging from not desired (1) to much desired (7). Scores ranged from 2,04 in Columbia to 3,65 in South Africa (House 2004: 540). This variable is available for 56 nations. The variable code in States of Nations is ValuePowerDistance_1996.

Hofstede's Power Distance Index: In the context of Hofstede's (1994) landmark study of work values in business organisations employees all over the world answered the following questions; 1) How frequently are employees afraid to express disagreement with their managers? 2) How would you describe the actual decision-making style of your boss (paternalistic, authoritarian vs. else) and 3) What decision-making style would you prefer your boss to have? The first two questions depict actual hierarchy and the last approval of hierarchy. The summed Power Distance Index (PDI) summarizes the previous indicators by mixing perception and preference. The latest update of the Hofstede study covers 74 nations and regions (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005). Ratings are available in the 'States of Nations' data file as variable PowerDistance_1965.2002.

Happiness and perception of power distance

When regressing life satisfaction versus practiced power distance in European countries, a negative trend exists ($r = -0.32$) with a very large difference between the Northern and Southern countries, as the difference of average of the two sets of country covers 59% of the whole range of practice power distance, as highlighted in Table 3.

Happiness and perceived control in nations

Hierarchy is also reflected in an individuals perceived freedom at work as well as freedom in general and in perceived control in life, the less freedom and control individuals perceive in a country, the more hierarchical that society apparently is.

As shown on Figure 2 **Error! Reference source not found.**, there is a high correlation between happiness and freedom and control of one's life ($r = +0.69$) and

with perceived freedom at work ($r = +0.72$). As one could expect, the more freedom people feel they have, the happier they are. Once more we see that the difference between Northern and Southern Europe fits this general pattern. Both perceived individual freedom and happiness are higher in the Northern countries and both are lower in Southern countries.

This data corroborates well with the data from the World Values Survey of Table 3, where it appears that the freedom of choice in Northern Europe is about one point higher than in the South. Reduced individual freedom at work typically increases frustration at work and unhappiness. This is even more striking when looking at the percentages of people feeling exploited in their work, which represents more than half of Southern Europeans.

Figure 2 about here

All this shows that the lower happiness found in Southern European countries is at least partly due to the greater levels of hierarchy that exist in these societies.

Happiness and acceptance of hierarchy in nations

One might think that people in Southern countries value hierarchy and power distance more than in the North. Yet there is little difference in the valuation of the hierarchy between the South and the North. There is even a slightly greater preference for equality among Latin Europeans. Consequently, the difference between 'power distance as it is' and 'power distance as it should' is much larger in the South than in the North, which obviously entails frustration and unhappiness.

Happiness and PDI

A similar pattern appears when happiness is plotted against Hofstede's Power Distance Index, as shown in

Figure 3 below, be it that the relation is now negative; the greater the perceived power distance in nations the less happy people are on average. Again the Northern European

countries stand out as egalitarian and happy, while in the Southern European nations combine a hierarchical orientation with relatively low happiness.

Figure 3 about here

The main results in terms of acceptance of the hierarchy and perception of freedom in the two sets of countries are shown in table 3.

Table 3 about here

4) Why are South European countries more hierarchical?

Hierarchy exists in all societies, but the degree of inequality differs between societies. Various explanations have been proposed for these differences.

One line of explanation for societal differences in hierarchy focuses on the present and looks for contemporary drivers of hierarchy. A structural explanation in this context is that globalization is weakening the control of nation states, thereby giving free way to the powers of market capitalism. See for example Aghion & Williamson (1998). A related cultural explanation holds that growing individualism is undermining moral restraints to egoism and promoting self actualization at the cost of fellow man. See for example Elliott & Lemert (2006). Evident explanations for the North-South difference at hand here do not come to our mind.

Another line of explanation focuses rather on the past and looks for antecedents of present day hierarchy. A structural theory of that kind holds that the growing division of labour is creating increasing mutual interdependencies and that this is giving rise to reduction of social inequalities (e.g. Lenski & Nolan 2004, chapter 6). Explanations that focus on political institutions see contemporary hierarchy as an echo of earlier power struggles (e.g. Gurr et. al. 1990). In this vein cultural explanations stress the role of religion and hold that moral teachings of the past have shaped present day hierarchy.

This latter approach has evident applicability to the case at hand, since Catholicism has historically dominated the South of Europe and Protestantism the North. There is a large literature that describes the differences in orientation to hierarchy within these two strands of Christianity. See for example Gustafson (1978), Martin (1985), House (2004, chapter 17) and Bruce (2004).

Still it is possible that even before the Reformation hierarchy was less pronounced in the North of Europe than in the South and that the change to Protestantism was a consequence of that orientation rather than a cause. In that context it is worth taking a longer view and considering what macro-sociology has taught us about the development of social inequality in human societies.

Hierarchy over societal evolution

In their famous book on 'macro sociology', Lenski & Nolan (2004) describe several pathways in the developmental history of human society. The main path is depicted as a sequence of the following society types:

Hierarchy in hunter-gatherers: The first human societies consisted of small bands of about 40 people that lived a nomadic life, roaming large territories. These simple societies were typically quite egalitarian, since this way of life provides little opportunity to suppress one another. This kind of society was dominant in most of human history and seems to have existed for at least 50,000 years. Other types of societies developed only some 10.000 years ago and were based on modes of existence that involved more social hierarchy.

Hierarchy in horticultural societies: Hunter-gather societies were gradually driven out by

horticultural societies, based on slash-and-burn agriculture. This way of existence created a surplus, which came to be taken by warrior classes. This resulted in an unprecedented social inequality, which grew ever stronger when competition within the warrior classes resulted in ever larger hierarchically organized empires. Slavery was quite common in this phase of societal evolution.

Hierarchy in agrarian societies: The invention of the plow brought about the permanent use of land and this made humans even more dependent on a plot of land and more vulnerable to exploitation by one another. Social inequality reached its historical maximum in the feudal system that came to existence in most advanced agrarian societies

Hierarchy in industrial societies: Only a few hundred years ago inventions such as steam machine triggered the Industrial Revolution. This way of existence resulted in a considerable decline of social inequality, among other things because the fine grained division of labour has created many mutual dependencies.

In alignment with this main developmental path, Nolan and Lenski describe, several side paths, among which the following:

Hierarchy in fishing societies: Fishing societies developed in places close to the sea, where fish provided an additional source of subsistence. These societies are also quite egalitarian, among other things because exploitation by warriors is less easy in this case.

Hierarchy in maritime societies: Maritime societies developed from fishing societies, taking advantage of their strategic situation to develop trading and commerce. Egalitarianism continued in this phase, again because this way of existence involves less vulnerability to dominance by others.

Feudal heritage stronger in the South, maritime heritage stronger in the North

In this context we can make sense of the present day difference in hierarchy across the Northern and Southern countries of Europe. When societies drifted away from the hunter-gatherer type of society, the Southern and Northern European areas seem to have followed somewhat different paths, due to different geographical and demographical constraints. Conditions in Northern Europe were more suited for the fishing and the maritime track, as appeared in the flourishing Viking societies before the Middle Ages and in maritime expansion of England and the Netherlands following the Middle Ages. More hierarchical agricultural-based societies came to dominate in Southern Europe and this appears in a greater concentration of landownership and greater dominance of church and nobility. This is likely to have anchored hierarchy more strongly in the culture of Southern societies, whereas the original human bent to equality has been better preserved in Northern European countries.

5) Why are people less happy in hierarchical society?

A common view is that happiness depends on the degree to which life fits one's values. In this context we could expect that people are less happy, the greater the difference between the degree of hierarchy they perceive to exist in their country and the degree of hierarchy they deem desirable. We checked this explanation using the above mentioned GLOBE study in which both perceived degree and acceptance of hierarchy were assessed in 53 nations. We computed the difference between perceived and accepted hierarchy, and added this as the variable ValuePracticeGapPD_1996 to the datafile States of Nations. The correlation with happiness appeared to be small ($r = -.14$). This illustrates the limitations of this explanation: people can be made unhappy by the things they value. This is quite clear in the case of corruption, people being clearly less happy in countries where favouritism is morally endorsed. We see the same in this case of hierarchy, which is most accepted in the Southern European Latin countries that suffer from it.

A less common view holds that happiness depends more on fit of social organization with universal human nature than on fit with culturally variable notions of the good life. This view is explained in more detail in Veenhoven (1999). Seen in this context the question arises: Why is human nature hierarchy averse?

A plausible answer to this question is that the human species evolved in the context of hunter-gatherer society, which was quite egalitarian and allowed a great deal of self-direction. From this perspective, societal development went against human nature, at least in its agrarian phase. This view is presented convincingly by Mariansky and Turner (1992). In their book 'The social cage' they argue that humans are social animals, but that their need for social ties is limited. In their view, evolution has resulted in a human preference for the 'weak' social ties that exist in hunter-gatherer societies, over the 'strong' social ties that came about later in agricultural society. 'Strong' ties with a clan were required for survival in the conditions of agrarian society, but pressed people into a 'social cage'. In the view of Mariansky and Turner, the industrial revolution has opened the door of that cage and has instigated a mass flight from the oppressive social networks of the land to the freedom of city life.

6) Conclusion

People live happier in the Northern countries of Europe than in the Southern countries. This difference in happiness is paralleled by a difference in degree of social hierarchy; Southern countries are more hierarchical and probably so because feudalism has been more prominent in their history. The negative correlation between happiness and hierarchy is likely to reflect a causal effect, humans being hierarchy averse by nature.

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Table 1:
Average happiness in Northern and Southern European nations around 2005

Region	Nation	Life satisfaction (Overall happiness)	Mood (affective component)	Contentment (cognitive component)
Northern	Denmark	8.3	60	3.9
	Netherlands	7.7	58	3.9
	Sweden	7.8	56	4.1
	Average	7.9	58	4.0
Southern	France	6.6	42	3.5
	Italy	6.7	39	3.3
	Spain	7.3	49	3.6
	Average	6.9	43	3.5
North-South difference				
In points on scale		1.0	15	0.5
In % actual scale range in the world		17%	31%	32%

Table 2:
Life, work and financial satisfaction in Northern and Southern European nations around 2005

Region	Nation	Satisfaction with job ²	Satisfaction with home life ³	Satisfaction with financial situation of household ⁴
Northern	Denmark	8.2	8.7	7.3
	Netherlands	7.6	8.1	7.5
	Sweden	7.7	8.4	6.8
	Average	7.8	8.4	7.2
Southern	France	6.9	7.6	6.0
	Italy	7.3	7.7	6.8
	Spain	7.1	7.6	6.1
	Average	7.1	7.6	6.3
North-South difference				
In points on scale		0.7	0.8	0.9
In % actual scale range in the world		23%	23%	21%

² World Values Survey, Job satisfaction, C033, available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

³ World Values Survey, Satisfaction with home life, D002

⁴ World Values Survey, Satisfaction with financial situation of household, C006

Table 3:
Valuation in the equality of hierarchy in Northern and Southern countries

		Perception of hierarchy	Perception of freedom			Acceptance of hierarchy	Power Distance Index
			<i>Practice Power Distance</i> ⁵	<i>Free in decision-making at work</i> ⁶ (scale 1-10)	<i>Feel exploited at work</i> ⁷ (in %)		
						<i>Hierarchy as it should</i> ⁹	<i>PDI</i> ¹⁰
Northern countries	Denmark	3.89	7.4	39	7.1	2.76	18
	The Netherlands	4.11	7.3	38	6.2	2.45	38
	Sweden	4.85	7.4	39	7.3	2.70	31
	Average	4.28	7.4	39	6.9	2.64	29
Southern countries	France	5.28	6.3	62	6.3	2.76	68
	Italy	5.43	6.7	46	6.1	2.47	50
	Spain	5.52	6.5	45	6.7	2.26	57
	Average	5.41	6.5	51	6.4	2.50	58
North-South difference							
In points on scale		1.13	0.9	12	0.5	0.14	29
In % actual scale range in the world		59%	30%	50%	20%	10%	31%

⁵ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, PracticePowerDistance_1996

⁶ World Values Survey, Freedom decision taking in job (C034)

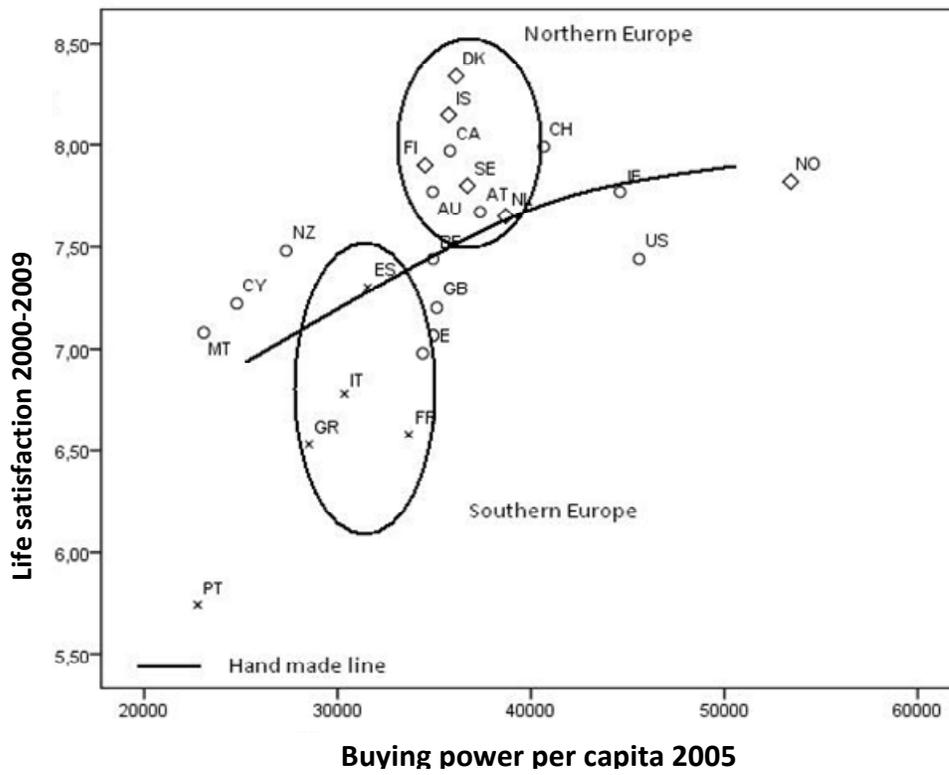
⁷ World values survey, Often feel exploited in your job (C032)

⁸ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, FreeLife_90s

⁹ House(2004), Table 17.4b

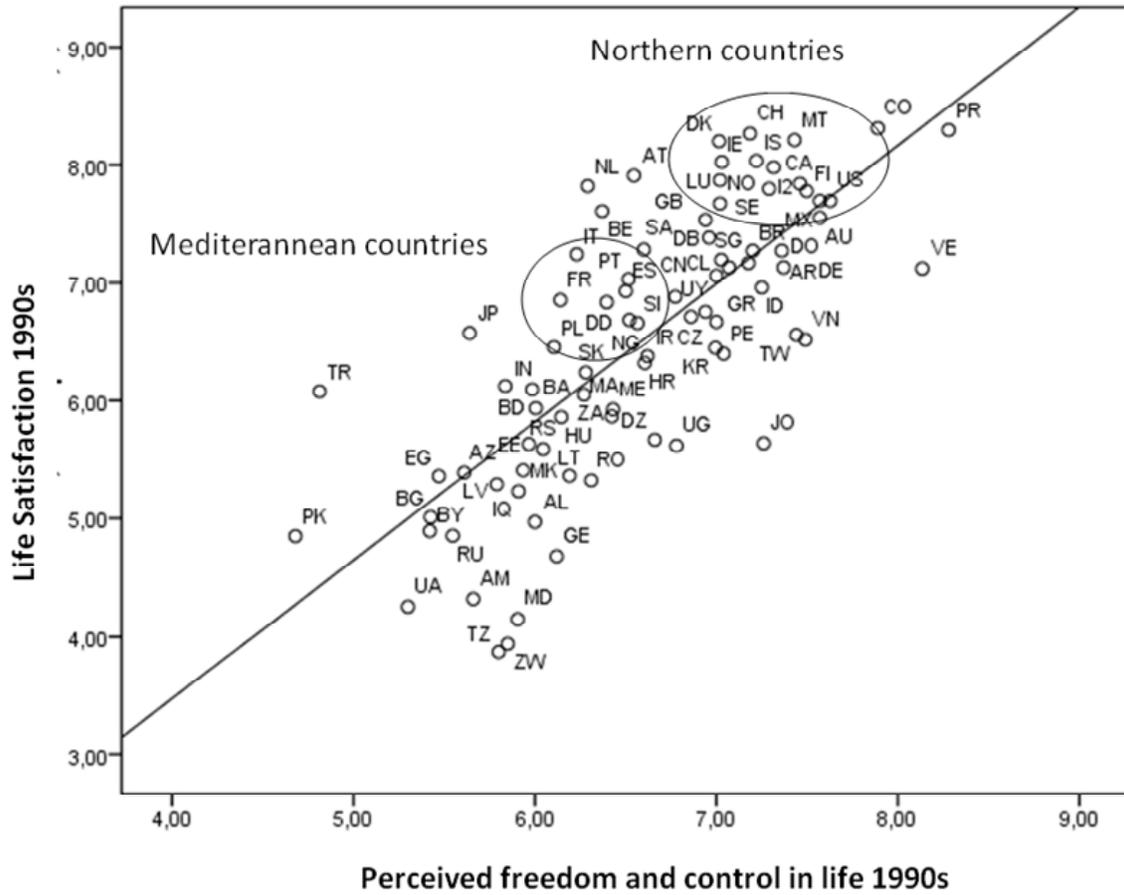
¹⁰ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, ValuePowerDistance_85

Figure 1:
Life satisfaction by economic prosperity in Western countries around 2005¹¹



¹¹ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, RGDP_2005

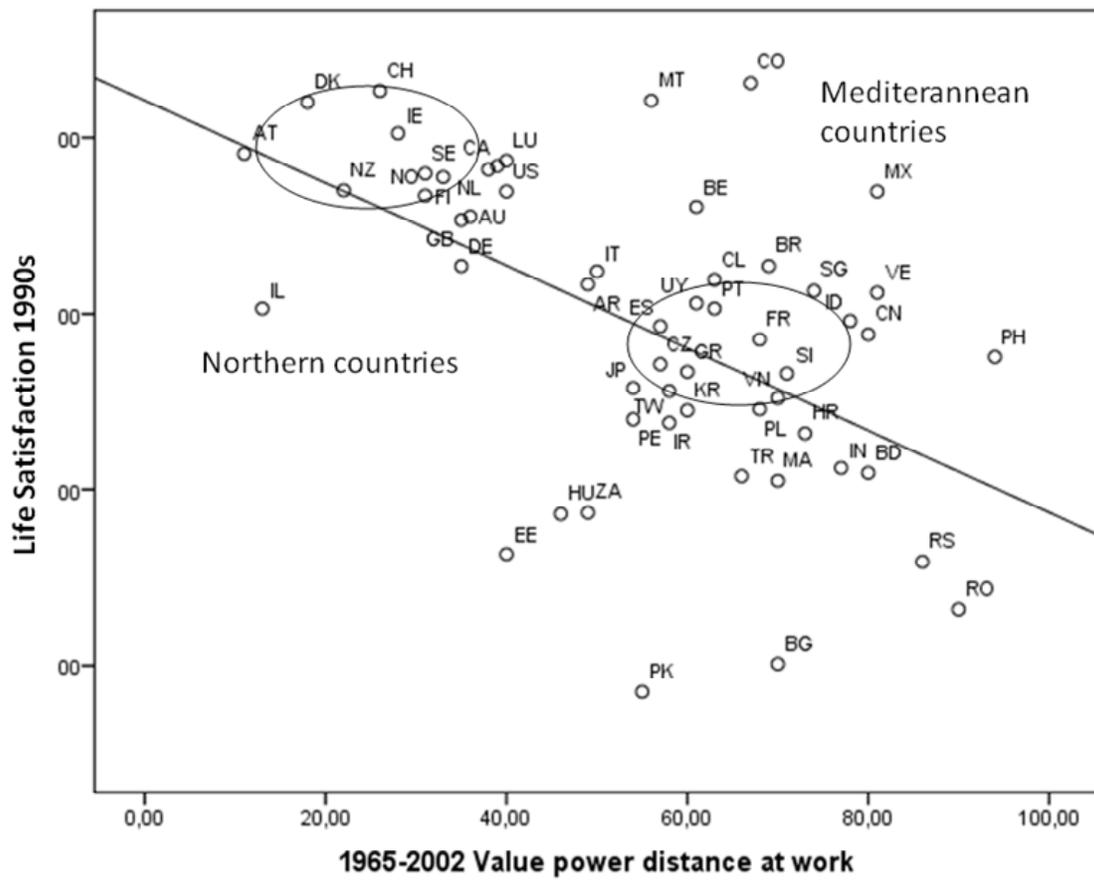
Figure 2:
 Life satisfaction¹² by perceived freedom and control in life¹³, in 85 countries



¹² World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, HappinessLS10_1990s

¹³ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, FreeLife_90s

Figure 3:
Life satisfaction¹⁴ by valuation of Power Distance¹⁵, in 62 countries



¹⁴ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, HappinessLS10_1990s

¹⁵ World Database of Happiness, States of Nations, ValuePowerDistance_85