

# HAPPINESS

## Lessons of empirical research<sup>1</sup>

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Happiness is a main goal in modern society; most individuals reach out for a happy life and also see much value in happiness (Harding 1985). Support for the moral philosophy that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number (Bentham 1789) is growing. Consequently, happiness is also rising on the political agenda (Bok 2010, Donovan et. al 2003, Frey & Stutzer 2002).

This pursuit of happiness calls for understanding of conditions for happiness and that requires systematic study of the matter. The study of happiness has long been a playground for philosophical speculation and this has not resulted in a solid evidence base. During the last decades, survey-research methods introduced by the social sciences have brought a break-through. Dependable measures of happiness have developed, by means of which a significant body of knowledge has evolved.

This literature on happiness can be framed within some key-questions that can be ordered as steps in the process for creating greater happiness for a greater number. 1) What is happiness precisely? 2) Can happiness be measured? 3) How happy are people presently? 4) What causes us to be happy or unhappy? and 5) Can happiness be raised lastingly?

### 1 WHAT IS 'HAPPINESS'?

The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all notions of the good life. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life' and denotes both individual and social welfare. The word is also used in the more specific meaning of subjective appreciation of life and that is what this chapter is about.

Happiness is defined as 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. In this meaning one cannot be happy without knowing and is delusional happiness still happiness.

#### *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

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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 the 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. The concept does not presume subjective awareness of that average level.

*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 an idea 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 the 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 rather than as a substitute (Veenhoven 2009).

## 2 CAN HAPPINESS BE MEASURED?

Since happiness is defined as something we have in mind, it can be measured using questions. A common question is:

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
extremely dissatisfied extremely satisfied

Though currently used in surveys such as the World values Survey (Inglehart & Welzel 2005) and the Gallup World Poll, these questions are much criticized.

### *Validity*

Though these questions are fairly clear, responses can be flawed in several ways. Responses may reflect how happy people think they should be rather than how happy they actually feel and it is also possible that people present themselves happier as than they actually are. These suspicions have given rise to numerous validation studies. Elsewhere I have reviewed this research and concluded that there is no evidence that responses to these questions measure something other than what they are meant to measure (Veenhoven 1984: chapter 3). Though this is no guarantee that research will never reveal a deficiency, we can trust these measures of happiness for the time being.

### *Reliability*

Research has also shown that responses are affected by minor variations in wording and ordering of questions and by situational factors, such as the race of the interviewer or the weather. As a result the same person may score 6 in one investigation and 7 in another. This lack of precision hampers analyses at the individual level. It is less of a problem when average happiness in groups is compared, since random fluctuations tend to balance. This is typically the case when happiness is used in policy evaluation.

### *Comparability*

Still, the objection is made that responses on such questions are not comparable, because a score of 6 does not mean the same for everybody.

A common philosophical argument for this position is that happiness depends on the realization of wants and that these wants differ across persons and cultures (Smart & Williams 1973). Yet it is not at all sure that happiness depends on the realization of idiosyncratic wants. The available data are more in line with the theory that it depends on the gratification of universal needs (Veenhoven 1991, 2009).

A related qualm holds that is happiness a typical western concept that is not recognized in other cultures. Yet happiness appears to be a universal emotion that is recognized in facial expression all over the world and for which words exists in all languages. Consequently the non-response to question about happiness appears to be low all over the world (Veenhoven 2010).

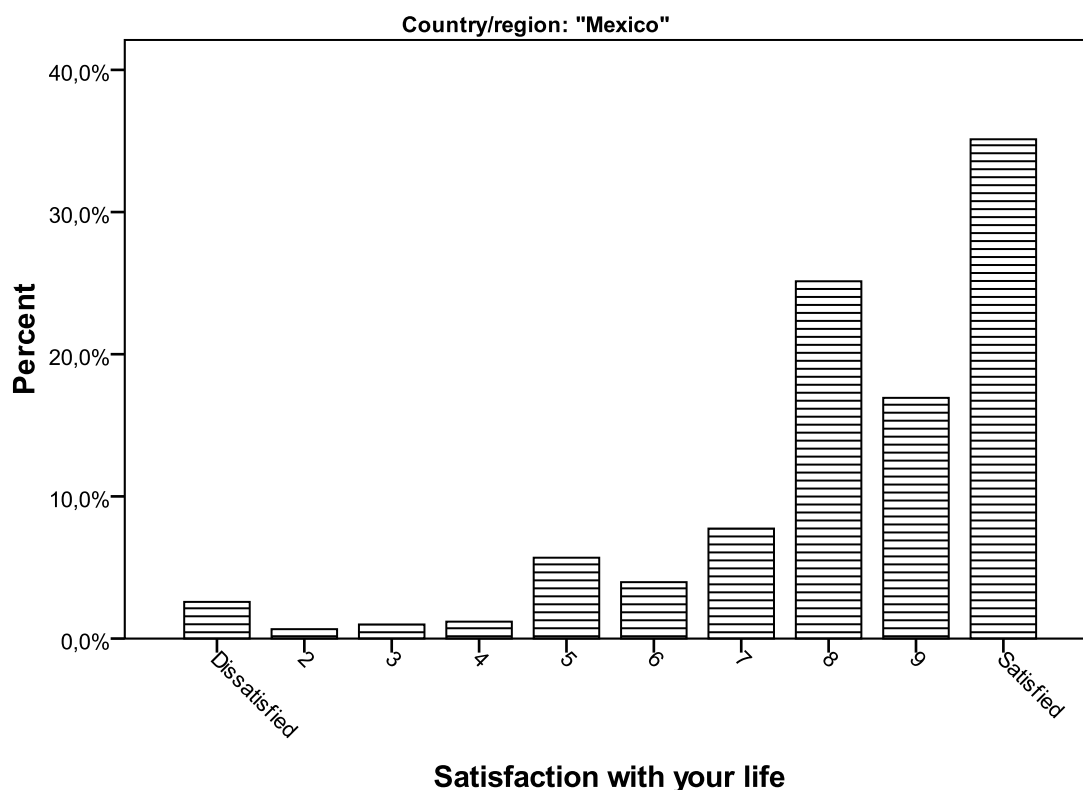
Another objection is that happiness is a unique experience that cannot be communicated on an equivalent scale. This qualm roots also in a constructivist view of man. Yet from an evolutionary point of view it is unlikely that we differ very much. As in the case of pain, there will be a common human spectrum of experience. In the related functional 'signal' view of affect it is not plausible either that happiness is something idiosyncratic. The data also tell a different story. If happiness cannot be communicated on an equivalent scale, there will be little correlation between subjective happiness and objective living conditions. Yet research shows several sizable correlations, some of which are presented in the schemes 5, 8 and 9 of this paper.

Lastly there is methodological reservation about possible cultural-bias in the measurement of happiness, due to problems with translation of keywords and cultural variation in response tendencies. Elsewhere I have looked for empirical evidence for these distortions, but did not find any (Veenhoven 1993: chapter 5).

## **3 HOW HAPPY ARE WE?**

Below is the response to a similar question in Mexico, the difference with the above example is that the scale ranges from 1 to 10 instead of 0 to 10. The most frequent chosen options are 8, 9 and 10 and only 11% scores below 6. The average is 8.2, which stretched to range 0-10 equals 8.0.

**Scheme 1**  
**Happiness in Mexico**



Source: World Values Survey 2005

How does Mexican happiness rank in comparison to other nations? Some illustrative findings are presented in scheme 2. The 7,9 rating of Mexico is an average of three surveys using a comparable question in this period. Mexico in the top range of the World. As one can see average happiness varies between 8,3 (Denmark) and 3,0 (Zimbabwe).

**Scheme 2**  
**Happiness in nations 2000-2009; Average on scale 0-10**

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• Denmark	8,3
• Switzerland	8,0
• <b>Mexico</b>	<b>7,9</b>
• Sweden	7,8
• USA	7,4
• Spain	7,2
• France	6,6
• Japan	6,5
• Turkey	5,6
• Russia	5,5
• Iraq	4,7
• Zimbabwe	3,0

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#### 4 WHAT CAUSES US TO BE MORE OF LESS HAPPY?

Having established *that* people differ in happiness, the next question is *why*. Various factors are involved; collective action and individual behavior, simple sensory experiences and higher cognition, stable characteristics of the individual and his environment as well as freaks of fate. Scheme 3 presents a tentative ordering of factors and processes in a sequence-model.

The model presumes that the judgment of life draws on the *stream of life-experiences*, particularly on positive and negative experience, which is a mental reaction to the *course of life-events*. This includes major one-time events, such as marriage or migrations, as well as repetitious mundane events, like getting up in the morning and doing the dishes. The events that happen in life are partly a matter of good or bad luck, such as in the case of accidents. The occurrences of life-events also depend on given conditions and capacities. Traffic accidents are less frequent in well-organized societies and among attentive persons. Thus, the chances of 'rewarding' and 'aversive' events are not the same for everybody. This is commonly referred to as *life-chances*, e.g. by Max Weber (1922) who emphasized differences in access to scarce resources. Present life-chances root in past events and chance-structures, in societal history as well as individual development.

An example may illustrate this four-step model: A person's life-chances may be poor, because he/she lives in a lawless society, is in a powerless position in that society, and is personally neither smart nor nice (step 1). That person will run into many adverse events. He/she will be robbed, duped, humiliated and excluded (step 2). Therefore that person will frequently feel anxious, angry and lonely (step 3). Based on this flow of experience that person will judge life-as-a-whole negatively (step 4).

**Scheme 3**

**Evaluation of life: a sequence model of conditions and processes**

LIFE-CHANCES →	COURSE OF EVENTS →	STREAM OF EXPERIENCE →	EVALUATION OF LIFE
<p><b>Quality of society</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic welfare</li> <li>• Social equality</li> <li>• Political freedom</li> <li>• Cultural lush</li> <li>• Moral order</li> <li>• Etc...</li> </ul> <p><b>Social position</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material property</li> <li>• Political influence</li> <li>• Social prestige</li> <li>• Family bonds</li> <li>• Etc..</li> </ul> <p><b>Individual abilities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical fitness</li> <li>• Psychic fortitude</li> <li>• Social capability</li> <li>• Intellectual skill</li> <li>• Etc...</li> </ul>	<p><b>Confrontation with:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deficit or affluence</li> <li>• Attack or protection</li> <li>• Solitude or company</li> <li>• Humiliation or honor</li> <li>• Routine or challenge</li> <li>• Ugliness or beauty</li> <li>• Etc...</li> </ul>	<p><b>Experiences of:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yearning or satiation</li> <li>• Anxiety or safety</li> <li>• Loneliness or love</li> <li>• Rejection or respect</li> <li>• Dullness or excitement</li> <li>• Repulsion or rapture</li> <li>• Etc...</li> </ul>	<p>Appraisal of average affect</p> <p>Comparison with standards of the good life</p> <p>Striking an overall balance of life</p>
Conditions for happiness		Appraisal process	

### *Quality of society*

Why does happiness differ so much across nations? Scheme 4 presents some of the societal qualities behind. Much of these factors are part of the 'modernity' syndrome. The more modern the country, the happier its citizens are. This finding will be a surprise to prophets of doom, who associate modernity with decay and it also contradicts the intuitions of several leading social scientists. In his 'Unbehagen in der Kultur' Freud (1930) argued that societal development requires the inhibition of primitive urges, which he saw as the essence of happiness. Likewise, in his 'De la division du travail social' Durkheim (1893: 230) argued against economists who praise the benefits of labor division, retorting "Cela suppose qu'en fait nous devenons plus heurus. Rien n'est moins certain". Though modernization may involve problems indeed, its benefits are clearly greater (Veenhoven 2005).

#### Scheme 4

#### **Happiness and society** in 146 nations 2000-2009

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<i>Characteristics of society</i>	<i>correlation with happiness</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Affluence</b>	+0.69	136
<b>Rule of law</b>		
• Civil rights	+0.50	131
• Corruption	-0.69	137
<b>Freedom</b>		
• Economical	+0.63	135
• Political	+0.53	131
• Personal	+0.41	83
<b>Equality</b>		
• Income inequality	-0.08	119
• Gender inequality	-0.21	110
<b>Pluriformity</b>		
• % Migrants	+0.29	126
• Tolerance of minorities	+0.49	77
<b>Modernity</b>		
• Schooling	+0.56	138
• Urbanization	+0.58	137
Explained variance (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> )	75%	

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Source: World Database of Happiness, Data file States of Nations (Veenhoven 2011d)

### Social position

Next to these findings on differences in average happiness *across* countries, there is also a lot of research on differences in individual happiness *within* countries. Because most of these studies are inspired by egalitarian social policy, the emphasis is often on social differences, such as in income, education and employment. Contrary to expectation these positional differences bear little relationship to happiness, at least not in modern affluent society. Together positional variables explain mostly no more than 10% of the variance in happiness. The main findings are summarized in scheme 5.

#### Scheme 5

#### **Happiness and position in society: summary of research findings**

	<i>Correlation within western nations</i>	<i>Similarity of correlation across all nations</i>
<b>Social rank</b>		
• Income	+	-
• Education	±	-
• Occupational prestige	+	+
<b>Social participation</b>		
• Employment	±	+
• Participation in associations	+	+
<b>Primary network</b>		
• Spouse	++	+
• Children	0	?
• Friends	+	+
	++ = Strong positive	+ = Similar correlations
	+ = Positive	± = Varying
	0 = No relationship	- = Different correlations
	- = Negative	? = No data
	? = Not yet investigated	

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection Correlational Findings (Veenhoven 2011c),

### Life ability

The strongest correlations observed are at the psychological level; happy people are typically better endowed than the unhappy. The common variance explained by such variables tends to be around 30%. Some main findings are summarized in scheme 6. Much of the findings on individual variation in happiness boil down to a difference in *ability to control ones environment* and this pattern seems to be universal (Veenhoven 2010).



**Scheme 6**  
**Happiness and life-abilities: summary of research findings**

	<i>Correlation within western nations</i>	<i>Similarity of correlation across all nations</i>
<b>Proficiencies</b>		
• Physical health	+	+
• Mental health	++	+
• IQ	0	+
<b>Personality</b>		
• Internal control	+	+
• Extraversion	+	+
• Conscientiousness	+	?
<b>Art of living</b>		
• Lust acceptance	+	+
• Sociability	++	+
	++ = Strong positive	+ = Similar correlations
	+ = Positive	± = Varying
	0 = No relationship	- = Different correlations
	- = Negative	? = No data
	? = Not yet investigated	

Source: World Database of Happiness, collection Correlational Findings (Veenhoven 2011c)

## 5 POSSIBILITY OF GREATER HAPPINESS

Can public policy create greater happiness? Several scientists think not. Some psychologists maintain that happiness is largely inborn or at least embedded in stable personality. Hence a better society will not yield happier citizens. This view is known as the 'set-point' theory (e.g. Lykken 1999). Some sociologists draw the same conclusion, because they think that happiness depends on social comparison and that you are not better off than the neighbors if conditions for everybody improve. In that vein the case of the USA is often mentioned as an example; material wealth would have doubled there since the 1950s while average happiness seems to have remained at the same level (e.g. Easterlin 1995). Yet these scientists are wrong, both empirically and theoretically.

### *Empirical indications*

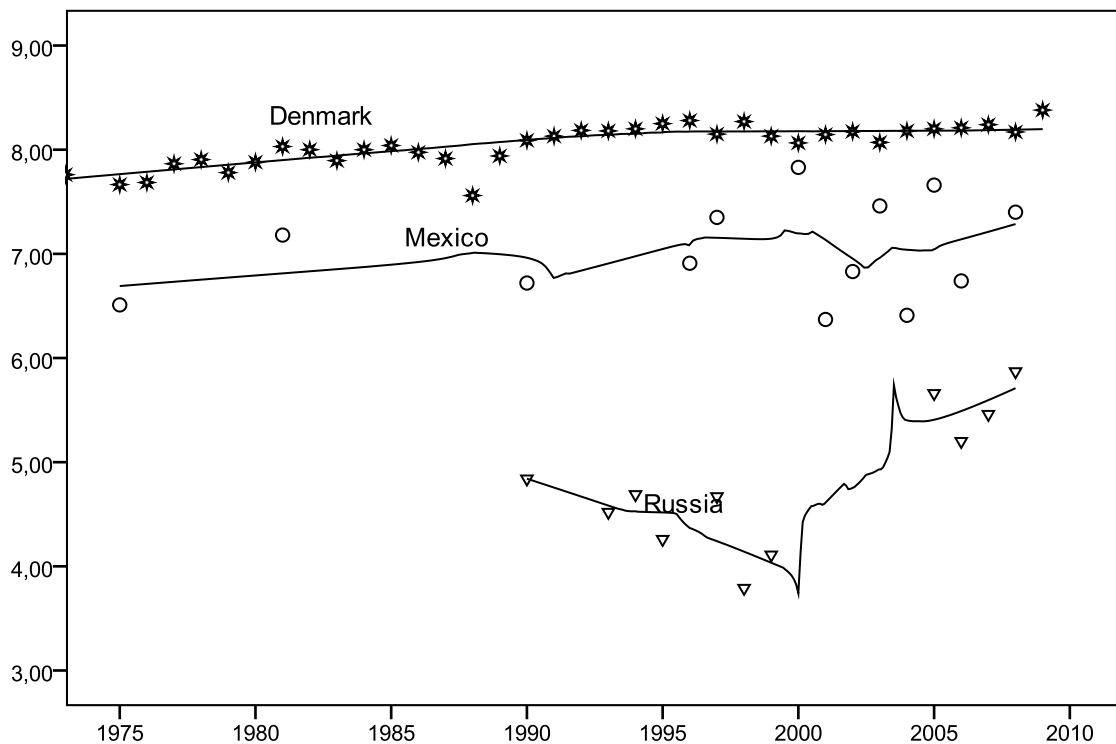
There is a clear relation between average happiness and societal quality. Think of the case of Zimbabwe in scheme 1, where this country is at the bottom with an average of 3.3. Apparently people cannot live happy in a failed state, even if their neighbors suffer the same. The correlations in scheme 4 show that this is no exception, differences in quality of society explaining about 80% of the variation in average happiness in the present day world.

Average happiness *has* changed in most nations, and typically to the better (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006). Scheme 7 depicts a gradual rise of happiness in Denmark over the last 30 years and a dramatic fall of average happiness in Russia, following the Ruble crisis in 1995. Clearly, happiness is not fixed to a set-point!

Scheme 7 illustrates also that greater happiness is possible in most nations of the world. Average happiness is currently highest in Denmark, with an average of 8.2. What is possible in Denmark should also be possible in other countries. Don't object that Danish happiness is a matter of genetic endowment or national character, because scheme 3 shows that happiness has improved in Denmark since 1973.

Present day happiness in Denmark may be close to the maximally possible level. If so, there is still a long way to go for most nations of this world, since the world's average is now about 5.5. If we might ever reach the maximum of average happiness, there is still the possibility to extend its duration and create more happy life years for a greater number (Veenhoven 2005).

**Scheme 7**  
***Trend average happiness in three nations***



Source: World Database of Happiness, data file Trends in Nations (Veenhoven 2011d)

***Theoretical underpinning***

The erroneous idea that greater happiness is not possible roots in erroneous theories about the nature of happiness. One of these mistaken theories is that happiness is merely a matter of outlook on life and that this outlook is set in fixed dispositions, which are part of individual personality as well as of national character. Another faulty theory is that happiness results from cognitive comparison, in particular from social

comparison. Elsewhere I have shown that these theories are wrong (Veenhoven 1991, 1995).

My alternative theory of happiness holds that we appraise life on the basis of affective information in the first place. We experience positive as well as negative affects and in appraising how much we like the life we live, we assess to what extent the former outbalance the latter. This theory fits Bentham's concept of happiness as 'the sum of pleasures and pains'. In my view, positive and negative affects signal the gratification of basic human needs, so in the end happiness is determined by need gratification. Elsewhere I have discussed this theory in more detail in (Veenhoven 2009).

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Happiness can be defined as subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole. Empirical studies on happiness show considerable difference; both difference in average happiness across countries and differences between citizens within countries. At its present stage, our understanding of happiness already shows that greater happiness for a greater number is possible in principle, and indicates some ways for achieving that goal.

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