

IN PURSUIT OF GREATER HAPPINESS FOR A GREATER NUMBER

A personal account

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ABSTRACT

I was raised and tasked by my parents to contribute to society. As a student, I learned about the moral principle that we should aim at achieving greater happiness for a greater number of people and took this as a lead. I do not advocate any particular way to greater happiness, but I have spent my academic life charting determinants of happiness. To this end, I developed the World Database of Happiness. This is a findings-archive in which I stored the results of empirical research on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. Research on this subject has grown exponentially since the 1960s and to date (2022) the archive holds some 50.000 findings. This provides an evidence base for rational pursuit of happiness.

Keywords: utilitarianism, subjective wellbeing, life-satisfaction, finding archive, research synthesis

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BIO

Ruut Veenhoven was born in 1942). He studied sociology and is also accredited in social psychology and social-sexology. Today, Veenhoven is an emeritus professor of 'Social Conditions for Human Happiness' at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, where he is currently involved with the [Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization](#). Veenhoven is also a special professor at North-West University in South Africa, where he is involved with the [Opentia](#) research program. He is director of the [World Database of Happiness](#) and a founding editor of the [Journal of Happiness Studies](#).

Throughout his academic career, Veenhoven's research has mainly been on 'happiness': defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole. One part of his research is 'happiness and public choice', with the purpose to build an evidence basis for policies aimed at greater happiness for a greater number. Another research line is 'happiness and private choice' and the purpose is here to build an evidence base on which individuals can draw when faced with major life-choices, such as whether to have children or to take early retirement. In the context of this latter strand, Veenhoven developed a combination of a self-help site and a large-scale follow-up study; the 'Happiness Indicator'. This tool is available on the internet at <http://www.gelukswijzer.nl/hi>

Veenhoven has also published on abortion, love, marriage and parenthood.

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BACKGROUND

I was born in 1942 in The Hague in The Netherlands, during the German occupation. As a child I played happily in the ruins of houses that had been bombed during the war, without awareness of the tragedy that had created this playground. My parents were both university-educated, my father as a historian and my mother as an economist; they were both committed to make the world a better place.

My father was a right-wing activist. After unsuccessfully opposing the de-colonization that took place in the second half of the 20th century, he engaged in promoting the case for 'plural societies', where minorities are granted considerable self-rule and edited a standard work on that subject (Veenhoven, W 1975). My mother was one of the founders of the consumer union in the Netherlands and worked for this organization as a publications editor and represented consumer interests in various platforms of the Dutch consultation economy. Both my grand-fathers had also been dedicated to supporting the public good.

This family background is probably among the reasons that while already in adolescence, I felt obliged to contribute to society, although I did not know how then. Until age 25 I was like the soldier looking for a cause to fight.

Since I hoped, somehow, to contribute to a better society, I opted to study sociology, expecting to learn what makes a good society. This provided me with a more nuanced view on social reality as well as with practical information on how social movements work. Having gone to the university, I never left. I now write this chapter at age 80 as an emeritus professor at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where I started as a student in 1964.

That I became an academic was partly a matter of chance and partly a matter of choice. One of the chance factors was that the universities were expanding in 1960s, which brought job-opportunities in its trail. Another chance factor was that I could not accept a government job right after I finished my study in the sociology of public administration, because I had become involved in an issue that was politically too hot for any civil servant to be engaged with. This was the issue of repeal of the then existing restrictions on abortion, which today is still a political hot potato in the USA. A job at a university allowed me more opportunity to oppose the ruling restrictions to abortion and to freely express my views on this matter. One choice factor was that I had developed an interest in empirical research during my study of sociology, not in the least place because of my part-time job as a student-assistant. Another choice factor was that I had become old enough to be aware of the political power of scientific knowledge.

ACTIVISM

Like many youngsters in the 1960s, I got involved in activism for promoting social reform, both for the sakes at stake and because I enjoyed the activity.

Student interest

As a student, I became involved in advocacy for *better education*, the quality of which was poor at this time of expanding higher education. I organized the first teacher-evaluation at my university, which almost cost me my job as a student assistant. Evaluation of teacher's courses is now standard in universities. I also participated in the university democracy of that time.

Sexual reform

In the 1960s I also became involved in advocacy for sexual reform, in particular for better availability of contraception. I joined the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform NVSH and became oriented in the emerging discipline of social sexology. Looking back, I realize that I was part of what is now known as the 'sexual revolution'.

Abortion

In 1967, a personal experience dragged me into the issue of abortion. My girlfriend became unintentionally pregnant, and we had to get an illegal abortion. We managed (and had two wanted children later) but went through a considerable risk. It made me aware of an, at that time, largely unrecognized social problem and provided me with a cause, the one I was looking for, the repealing of the restrictive abortion law.

I dived into the literature and soon found an inspiring example in the British 'Abortion Law Reform Association'. I devoted my master thesis to an inspection of the then existing Dutch government's policy towards abortion. As part of that research, I did an internship at the Dutch Ministry of Justice. I found that there was no clear policy on abortion and that there was a lack of information on effects of the restrictive law, such as the occurrence of illegal abortion. My mentor disagreed with this conclusion, arguing that there was no problem and hence no need to set out for a policy. We met again in the Dutch parliament building when the first new abortion law was put to vote 8 years later

In 1969 a group of medical doctors announced that they would start an abortion clinic; initially mainly as a political statement. I joined this group and organized a lobby, applying what I had learned in my study of sociology about pressure groups. It was our time and a political climate had developed in which we could start an abortion clinic in spite of the existing restrictive Dutch abortion law. This was possible in the context of the Dutch policy of tolerance for temporary deviations from the letters of law, if supported by a considerable part of the electorate. This policy of tolerance is still in place in the Netherlands and for example allows the selling of soft drugs in 'coffee-shops'.

The Rotterdam abortion clinic was opened officially by the wife of the major and a symbolic representative of the social-democratic majority party in 1972. Several more abortion clinics opened in the Netherlands in the following years, serving some 30.000 Dutch women every year and even more women with unwanted pregnancies from other European nations where abortion was still forbidden. The Dutch clinics united in a federation in 1972, the aims of which were to guarantee good care, medically as well as psychological and to press for change of the law. I chaired the federation, until the situation of tolerance was finally legalized with the adoption of a

new Dutch abortion law in 1984 and the full implementation of this law in 1988.

Voluntary childlessness

Though an enthusiastic father myself, I became involved in advocacy for voluntary childlessness. In spite of the availability of the pill and abortion, unwanted children were still being born. One of the reasons for this was social pressure; married couples were expected to raise a family and voluntary childlessness was seen as selfish. Another reason was misinformation, childlessness was said to lead into unhappiness, in particular for women because it would go against their maternal instincts.

In the context of the above-mentioned Dutch society for sexual reform, I started a consciousness raising group, which provided information and organized meetings on choosing to have children or not. One of the messages was that childlessness would not make you unhappy and that there is no instinctual need to have children (Veenhoven 1975). Another message was that children are better off when really wanted by their parents. To date (2022) some 10% of Dutch women opt not have children. This choice is now generally accepted, though not always welcomed.

Happiness was an issue in most of these subjects of activism; it was a major reason to press for the liberation of sex, legalization of abortion and acceptance of voluntary childlessness.

HAPPINESS

One of the reasons why I opted to study sociology was that I hoped to learn more about what makes a good society. With the cold war still going on at that time, this question was typically answered based on the degree to which society fits ideological criteria, such as freedom and equality. Some of my co-students idealized the communist countries of that time and had posters of the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara on the wall of their room. I took a more pragmatic position in this discussion and wondered which system was the best livable for people. How livable a social system is will reflect in the happiness of the people who live there, and this can be assessed empirically in principle.

The greatest happiness principle

I was put on the track of happiness during a course on social philosophy, in which I learned about the moral principle that the best thing to do is to do what yields the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Happiness could not be measured at the time that Jeremy Bentham formulated this principle (1879) but I realized that the newly developed methods of social scientific survey research would allow an empirical assessment of experienced happiness.

First literature review

So in 1968, I started to gather the then available empirical on happiness. I found some 20 studies of varying quality which sufficed for a student paper. Among the studies I encountered were the seminal works of Gurin et al (1960) who reported on a large-scale survey on mental health in which happiness was side topic. I also found the books by Cantril (1965), who did an impressive cross-national study on perceived quality of life, and Bradburn & Caplovitz (1965) who focused on reported happiness for the first time.

Though not rated very highly by my professor (7 out of 10), I got the paper published in the Dutch sociological journal (Veenhoven 1970). To my surprise the paper was reprinted in a book and a weekly magazine aimed at people with tertiary education. This made me realize that there is a demand for knowledge on happiness. This was one of the reasons that made me later to decide to focus on charting conditions for happiness.

Failed study on lifegoals and happiness

When I was appointed an assistant professor in social psychology in 1969, as a requirement for that job, I had to do a PhD in that field. I opted to investigate the effects of life-goals on happiness. I theorized that having clear goals would affect our happiness positively, among other things because having clearly defined goals will keep us going. Following the methodological fad of that time, I measured both happiness and life-goals in an 'unobtrusive' way, asking respondents to complete statements such as: "In the future I will". The coding of responses I obtained took a lot of time and left me with considerable uncertainty. I realized too late that things of which people are aware can better be measured using direct questions; lifegoals and happiness are such things.

To my surprise, I found a slight negative correlation between having goals and happiness. This made me realize that there are also disadvantages to having clear goals in life, and that the question should be rather: How do these effects balance in different persons and situations? I also realized too late that unhappy people are more likely to think of what they want in their life, since there is apparently something missing. This would result in the negative correlation I had found, which might have concealed the positive effect I had expected. Elimination of this selection effect would require a long-term follow-up study. Though such hindsight wisdom has value, a dissertation with such a message was not a good ticket for an academic career.

Conditions of happiness

I was not entirely empty handed, since the introductory chapter I had prepared had already grown too large. I had tried to include information on all the existing empirical research on happiness, the amount of which had grown fast since my 1969 review of the literature. Focusing on taking stock of that newly available research, I developed a new review technique, describing research findings using a standard format and terminology on index cards, which I later sorted by subject.

In this way I gathered some 4000 research findings, observed in 246 studies

over the years 1911-1975. The text of the cards was published in a voluminous 'Databook of Happiness' (Veenhoven 1984a) which served as the basis of my dissertation entitled 'Conditions of Happiness' (Veenhoven 1984b). In retrospect, this was a type of 'meta-analysis', a technique that had not been applied in the social sciences at that time.

I wanted my dissertation be published by a scientific publishing house but had difficulty finding one that would do so. After several rejections I submitted my book to Reidel Publishers, which is now part of Springer Nature. The text landed initially on the desk of the philosophy editor who rejected it, claiming that happiness could not be measured. Fortunately, I was able to guide the text to the editor of the journal on 'Social Indicators Research', a new journal that Reidel had begun to publish. This helped and the book sold well; it is still available today.

The editor of the Journal of Social Indicators Research was Alex Michalos, who would later edit the monumental Encyclopedia of Quality of Life (Michalos 2014). He introduced me to the working group Social Indicators of the International Sociological Association, where I met several other pioneers in the study of happiness. Bob Cummins (197a, b) and Ed Diener (1984) had also started taking stock of the available research. Bruce Heady (1981; Headey & Wearing 1992) introduced me to the first large scale follow-up study on happiness. I also met with Wolfgang Zapf (Glatzer & Zapf 1984) and his German research group on Social Indicators. Invited several times as a guest researcher, I witnessed the development of an unprecedented research program in which happiness was a main topic.

World Database of Happiness

Over the years I have kept on harvesting research findings on happiness. In the 1990s the enlarged collection was published in a 5 volume book series (Veenhoven 1993a, 1993b, 1994a) and with the advent of personal computers these books developed into an electronic database. This database was used to feed a website, which went viral in the year 2000. This site was recently revised to the now available techniques.

To date (Veenhoven 2022), this source holds some 50.000 research findings on happiness; about half on how happy people were at particular times and places (distributional findings) and half findings on things that go together with more or less happiness (correlational findings). The structure of this database is presented on [Figure 1](#). The database is available on the web at <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

Finding pages.

Research findings are reported on electronic finding pages, using a standard format and terminology. An example of a finding page appears if you click [here](#). From this page, you can see that among academics there was no relationship between their happiness and student ratings of how *handsome* they looked, but a significant correlation with how *happy* the academics looked. The pages contain links to the

publication in which the finding was reported and to the *statistics* used. If you click on the *subject*, you will see other findings in this subject category.

Use in research review

All the finding pages have a unique internet address and this allows a condensed presentation of findings in a tabular overview. On [Figure 2](#) is an example of 75 findings on the relationship between happiness and home-ownership. Each sign in the table links to an online finding page with full detail. At a glance you can see that the relation is typically positive and that this pattern holds across methods and kinds of home-ownership.

Finding reports

Combinations of finding pages are also presented in finding reports, such as on nations. An example of the report on happiness in the United Kingdom is given on [Figure 3](#).

Continuation

What started in a card-box on my desk in the 1970s has now developed into a project too large to handle for a single scientist. The number of empirical studies on happiness is growing every year. This year (2022), some 800 new studies will be published, the selection of which requires the consideration of some 2000 publications. I can handle these amounts with the help of many volunteers (listed [here](#)), but continuation after my time would require some 3 paid full-timers. I have tried get the database [sponsored](#) by interested businesses, as yet unsuccessfully.

Now at the end of my days, I am leaving a well-functioning database and have guaranteed continued availability after my time. On the website I have left instructions for younger scientists who want to [build on this source](#) or use the [finding archive technique](#) for other subjects.

Use for finding ways to greater happiness

I used the database in the first place to answer questions about the possibility of greater happiness for a greater number, such as whether happiness is relative (Veenhoven 1991) and whether happiness is a fixed trait (Veenhoven 1994b). Having established that greater happiness is possible, the next question was how that can be achieved. In this context, I inspected the available findings for clues about what governments can do to make citizens happier (Veenhoven 2011). One of the debated topics in this context is whether economic growth will make us any happier; I found it does (Veenhoven & Vergunst 2014).

I have also used the archive to get an overview on the development of happiness in nations over the years and found that average happiness tends to rise (Veenhoven 2017), while inequality of happiness in nations declines (Veenhoven 2005). Apparently, we are on the right track in the pursuit of greater happiness for a greater number.

Research findings on happiness can also guide individuals in their search for greater personal happiness. In making choices in life, it is good knowing how other

people, who have made such choice, have fared happiness wise; in particular how the choice has affected the happiness of people like you. Examples of such major choices are, having children or not, migrating to another country or taking early retirement.

On [Figure 2](#) you saw an overview of the findings on the relationship between happiness and *home ownership*, which shows that people live typically happier in houses they own. In that vein, I also used the database to chart the effect on happiness of *healthy eating* (Veenhoven 2019), of *consumption* (Veenhoven et al. 2021) and of *private wealth* (Jantsch & Veenhoven 2022).

Journal of Happiness Studies.

Above, I mentioned that I had difficulty getting my book on conditions of happiness published in 1984. I have had similar problems with getting articles on happiness accepted in scientific journals, with sociological journals in particular (Veenhoven 2014). Colleague researchers interested in happiness met with the same problem at that time.

Fortunately, there was an outlet in the above-mentioned journal of Social Indicators Research. Over the years that journal came to publish an increasing number of articles on happiness and this promoted the founding of the Journal of Happiness Studies in 2000 with the same publisher. I served as the chief editor for the first 4 years, when it was still difficult to attract a sufficient number of good articles. By 2021, the journal was publishing some 160 papers a year and it had a 5-year impact factor of 5,8. Happiness is now also an accepted topic in other scientific journals and this will lead to the further development of a body of knowledge on how to achieve greater happiness for a greater number of people.

Happiness self-help tool

Another way to obtain greater happiness for a greater number of people, is to provide individuals with a sharper view on their own happiness, on the basis of which they can make better informed choices in life, such as whether or not to stay in a job or a marriage. Providing such information is the aim of the '[Happiness Indicator](#)', which I developed together with Arnold Bakker, Martijn Burger and Wido Oerlemans, in cooperation with the Dutch health insurance company VGZ, The start page of this web-based tool is presented on [Figure 4](#).

Like several other electronic self-help tools, the Happiness Indicator allows you to track your happiness, which will provide you with a more systematic view on how happy you usually feel. The happiness diary also shows you how happy you typically feel during different activities, such as when working or during evenings at home with your partner.

In addition, the Happiness Indicator allows comparison with how happy similar participants feel and informs you as such about the probability of becoming happier than you are, if you should make a certain life-choice. For instance, if you rate your happiness 6 on the 0 to 10 scale, you may think that this is the best possible level in your situation. However, when other participants like you score an 8 on average, you

gain an indication that greater happiness is probably possible for you.

The happiness diary will also be helpful for getting a view on how you could raise your happiness; your entries will not only show you how much of your time you spend in doing things you do not like, but allow you again to make comparisons with other participants. For instance, if you feel not too happy at work, you may think that this is how work is and look forward to retirement. However, if you see that comparable participants feel much better at their work, you may decide to look for another job.

The Happiness Indicator appears to be effective; a follow-up among the first 5411 users showed an average rise in happiness of about 5% (Veenhoven et al 2019).

Unfortunately, funding for the tool stopped after its successful development. Keeping it available requires some continuous investment, among which about 500 men-hours a year for maintenance and promotion. As yet, I have not found a party willing to pay for this, so the tool is currently in a half-sleep, still being used but not developed further, while considerable improvement is possible in the feedback to users. If you are interested in picking this up, contact me, or after my time, my co-investigator Martijn Burger at mburger@ese.eur.nl

EFFECT?

Has all this effort added to greater happiness for a greater number of people? I guess it has but I will never know for sure. I am more certain about the total effect of the quality-of-life movement, of which my work is a part. People have become happier in most countries over the last 50 years (Veenhoven 2017) and at least part of this gain seems to be due to greater attention being paid to the quality of the lives of people and to the availability of better information on what conditions make a good life possible.

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Figure 1
Start page of the World Database of Happiness

WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[This database](#) › [Collections](#) › [Search](#) › [Reports](#) › [Related](#) › [Research Field](#) › [FAQs](#) › [About us](#) › [Join us](#)

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Harvesting Happiness Research

In order to get happier, we must know what makes us happy. Policy makers must know in what kinds of societies and organizations people feel happiest. Individuals must know what ways of life tend to add most to the happiness of their kind of people.

Scientific research on happiness is booming, but its results are difficult to overview, due to terminological Babel and the growing number of studies, which is now passed more than 800 each year.

In the World Database of Happiness, we gather all the research findings on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. We describe these findings in a standard format and terminology on electronic 'finding pages' which are sorted by subject, place, time and methodology. This provides an overview of the available research findings on happiness and prepares for quantitative research synthesis. For more detail read ['What is this World Database of Happiness?'](#)

Key points in: [中国](#), [Deutsch](#), [English](#), [Español](#), [Français](#), [Nederlands](#).

[How to search in this source](#)

The World Database of Happiness is based in the [Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization](#) EHERO of Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Director: Ruut Veenhoven.

Figure 3

Example of a nation report: View the full report at <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/nations/united-kingdom-16/>



Distributional findings describe how happy people are in different times, places and publics in United Kingdom. The boxes show the value of each indicator and the position of that nation in comparison with the rest of the nations.

Rank in the world (2010-2019)



Trend of happiness over time

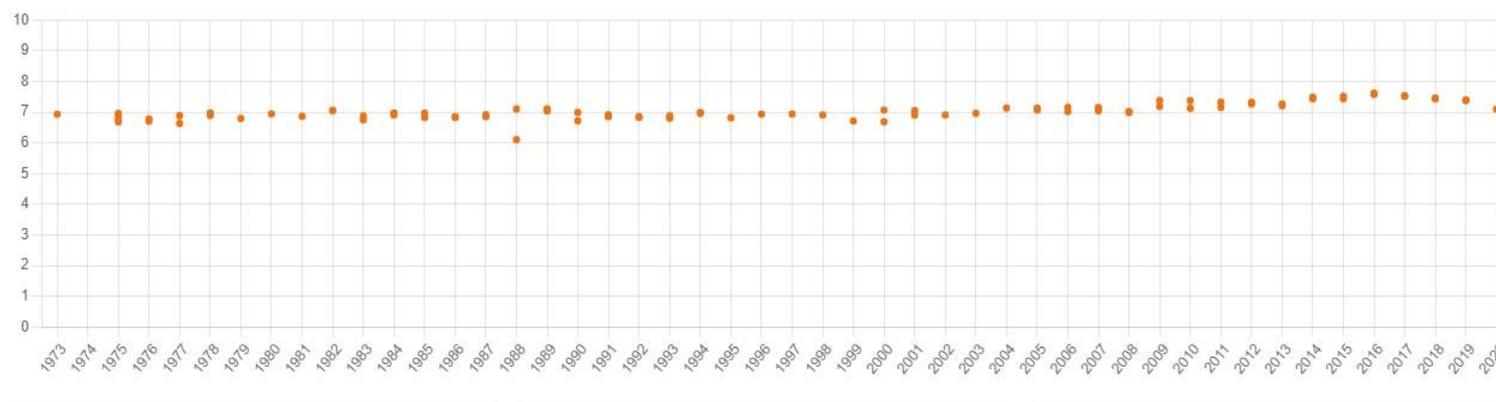


Figure 2
 Example of a research review using links to on-line finding pages

75 Research findings on happiness and home-ownership

	RESEARCH METHODS						
	Cross-sectional			Longitudinal		Experimental	
	Zero-order		Partial	Zero-orde	Partial	Zero-orde	Partial
Owned (vs Not)			+ + +/+ + +				
			+ + + +/+ +/-				
	+ + + + +		- +/+ + + 0				
			+ 0 0 0 0/-				
			- + +				
Owned (vs Rent)	+ + + + +		+/+ + + + +			+ +	
	++ ++ ++ ++		+ + 0 +/+ +			+ + +	+ +
	++ ++ ++ ++ +		+ /0 + +				
	++ + +						
Owned partially (vs not)			-/- +				
Owned (vs used free of charge)			+				
Rented (vs used free of charge)			+				
Redemption (vs used free of charge)			-				
Usufruct (vs used free of charge)			+				
Used free of charge (vs not)			+				

+ = positive correlation, significant
 + = positive correlation, not significant

0 = direction of correlation not reported and not significant

- = negative correlation, significant

- = negative correlation, not significant

++ = positive correlations with two different measures of happiness

-/+ = positive and negative correlations obtained with different sets of control variables or measures of happiness

All signs involve a link to a finding page with full detail in the [World Database of Happiness](#). Use control+click to view the page

Source: [Veenhoven et al 2018](#)

Figure 4
Start page of the Happiness Indicator



