

Measuring happiness

You can't buy it, everybody wants it but it can be quite hard to attain, which is why we sent Annemarie Hooe straight to the world's top researcher to find out some facts about happiness

The sixth floor of the stem, sombre-looking, anonymous-sounding Building M at Rotterdam's Erasmus University is the unlikely epicentre of the world's happiness. It is here, at the end of a long, rather insipid corridor, that Professor Ruut Veenhoven keeps tabs on the level of global cheer. Veenhoven is a sociologist and, with over 30 years of experience in the field, is also one of the world's foremost happiness experts.

"Happiness expert?" Veenhoven nods. "It's a relatively new field, and there are few who focus only on happiness," he says. His office is jam-packed with wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling bookcases and on his desk are stacks of papers and files. There is dearly much work to do and as global happiness waits for no man {or woman}, it's time to cut to the chase and go straight for the million-dollar question: What is it that makes people happy? Really, truly, gleefully happy? What's the secret to a life filled with joy? Inquiring minds want to know. "Well, climate for one thing can really affect overall happiness," Veenhoven

answers. "Even after you take away economic factors, the hotter a country is, the less happy people are." At the moment, the sun is shining but it's freezing cold outside, making it hard to imagine heat getting people down. "Cold isn't really that much of an issue anymore," he explains, "Because of proper heating nowadays. And you can dress against the cold. Heat is harder to tackle."

Universal truths

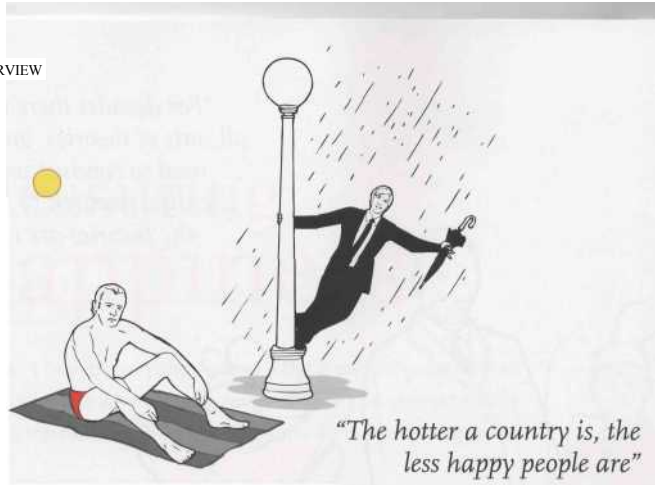
OK, so we've covered the weather, but what else influences people's happiness?

What are the big, universal factors? "That's exactly what we're trying to find out. For decades there were all sorts of theories, but we need to conduct proper scientific research to see if the theories are right. That's why I founded the World Database of Happiness. All over the world, scientists are conducting studies, but if the results aren't collected and shared, you can never get the bigger picture. Also, when

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people don't know what studies others are doing, you tend to get people doing the same type of research again and again. With the database, I try and gather all of the research available so we can really move forward," Veenhoven explains.

So, what does the database reveal? "If you go to the website, you can find studies cataloguing how happiness ratings differ depending on any number of factors, from the country in which you live, to your job, your age or the way you look. We now know that taller people for example, are happier than shorter people," he says.

The website sounds like fun... and, after a quick whizz round the various

search options you'll soon find it's a mildly addictive exercise, guaranteed to lift your spirits, even on one of those depressingly hot and sunny days.

When you select "artists" from the list of occupations, you can see that one study found that (Austrian) artists rated their level of well-being as below the levels indicated by the general population, so you could say that artists

rate. In another study, you can see that Dutch truck drivers are marginally happier than other employees, giving their lives a rating of 7.8 versus a rating of 7.5 given by those in other professions. So now you know. The possibilities are endless, and after a

while you start coming up with a whole bunch of theories of your own. "Aha! So that's why my neighbour is so grumpy: he's not a truck driver!" Your personal eureka moment is only a search term away.

Global view

As fascinating (and quirky) as such single studies are, again, it's really the bigger picture that Veenhoven is interested in. Studies across the board show there are a few key factors that determine the relative happiness of a country's inhabitants. These are: wealth, a stable political environment (regardless of the particular party in power) and freedom. Obviously if you don't have enough to eat, you're not going to be very happy, so in that sense, the wealth of a country in general is important. But strangely, relative personal wealth is not a key factor. "I was very surprised that inequality of personal wealth doesn't impinge on individual happiness.

Apparently we can live with the fact that people like Bill Gates earn a lot

more. But what I found perhaps even more surprising was that social security doesn't appear to matter at all," Veenhoven says. "In countries like Sweden, with a very high level of social security, people aren't happier than in similar Western European countries, where governments aren't as generous," he says.

"If you want to create a society where people are as happy as possible, it is very important to know which factors are important and which ones are not. Otherwise you invest in the wrong things. You could, for example, decide to do away with social security as it evidently doesn't make people happier. These are the types of things we want to research, in order to be able to assess, and hopefully even predict how specific



government policies or specific individual scenarios can affect people's happiness."

Happiness research can also be used for individual benefit. "Imagine for example that you can get a new job that pays €1,000 more per month, but it is an hour further away. What do you do? Many people think that the extra money will make them happier and opt for the new job. Studies have shown, however, that people were often happier beforehand with less money and underestimated the negative effect of the longer commute. If you would find yourself in that kind of situation you could look up the statistics and make a better-informed decision," Veenhoven explains.

According to Veenhoven, we live in a "multiple choice society" where our



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■ In the last 30 years, Western Europeans on average have gained an extra five years of happiness.

• Most people experience a "happiness

Happy stats

dip" between the ages of 30 to 50. Those 20 years generally, are not considered the happiest in a person's life.

• The happiness level of the Dutch has remained the same for the past ten years, at a steady 7.5 out of 10. The Danes on the other hand, have become happier over the past decade, with their score rising to 8.2.

individual happiness hinges on whether the choices we make suit who we are. Just because we now have the luxury of having so many choices doesn't mean we're all well-equipped to make them. In fact, studies have shown that we are quite bad at predicting which life choices will make us happier. So this type of research could help us make the right decisions, increasing our chances of happiness.

Choosing your mood

Yes please to that! But gathering enough data to predict whether person "A" will be happier by opting for what's behind door number two or door number three will take decades. So what about people who want a quick ticket to bliss? "Seeing a psychologist could help. In the past, psychologists focused on problems. They were there to help you deal with a trauma, depression, or negative experience. Nowadays, more and more people are seeking 'treatment' just to give themselves a little boost, helping them to feel a bit better, or get more out of themselves," Veenhoven says. >»■

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The South American enigma

South American countries generally give themselves a higher happiness rating than other countries with similar levels of wealth, freedom and political stability. It's something of a paradox that researchers have yet to find an explanation for. Theories abound, covering everything from the "compadre system" - strong, lifelong bonds between friends - to the popularity of the Virgin Mary. Or maybe it's the beans?



You can't help but wonder however, whether we're all not just a little too obsessed with being happy and whether we're not making ourselves unduly miserable in our continuous quest for joy. Tune in to any TV talk show or check out the rapidly growing girth of many a bookstore's self-help section, or the number of "life coaches" offering their services, and it seems like we're "happy junkies" all looking for a quick fix. Maybe our expectations have increased beyond what is feasible in the happy department. After all, how happy can a person be? When

are we happy enough? Is it right to expect constant happiness? Veenhoven doesn't see a problem: "In the Middle Ages, when people had pretty rotten lives, suffering was glorified. Now that a happy life seems possible, we want it. If you rate your life as a seven, on a scale of one to ten, why wouldn't you do something to try and up your score to a seven-and-a-half or an eight? A psychologist costs not much more than a plumber, so if seeing a professional can help make you happier, why wouldn't you invest in that?" Veenhoven says.

It's in the blood

While external factors certainly affect a person's happiness, the role of genetics shouldn't be underestimated. Part of being happy is simply a question of character. Statistics reveal that extrovert people are happier than introvert people. This is because extrovert people have better social skills and are more likely to meet people and experience more things. Although you can't change your genetic make-up or personality, you can work on improving your social skills to increase your chances in the happy states. It's also important to be active. Not doing anything makes people depressed.

Put that way, he certainly has a point. But what is happiness exactly? How can you define it and how can you measure it? Surely it's a very subjective thing? "Happiness is how much you like the life you live. In many ways it is like health - you don't notice it until it deteriorates. Methods differ, but generally research is based on questionnaires asking people to rate their own lives and various aspects of their lives," he says.

Up close and personal
So, what mark does he give his own life? "Aha," he smiles and thinks for a while. "I guess I'm bang on the Dutch average at 7.5." Is there room for more happiness in his life? "Of course... the thing that would make me even happier is to see my research being carried on, even when I'm not around anymore. Universities are great places for coming up with ideas, but you need funds to finance the ideas," he says. "Donations are always welcome!" They would certainly make this man very happy. And if there's one thing you can be sure of, it's that everyone loves a happy ending.:-)

State of the nations – the highs and lows

Top	Middle range	Bottom
>7.7	±6	<4
Denmark 8.2	Philippine 6.4	Armenia 3.7
Switzerland 8.1	India 6.2	Ukraine 3.6
Austria 8.0	Iran 6.0	Moldova 3.5
Iceland 7.8	Poland 5.9	Zimbab 3.3
Finland 7.7	South 5.8	Tanzania 3.2

All scores are on a scale of 1 to 10. Source: World Database of Happiness <http://worlddatabasehappiness.eur.nl>