



Interview with Ruut Veenhoven

1. Mr. Veenhoven, how happy are you today?

Ruut Veenhoven: I'm quite satisfied with my life as a whole today, just like yesterday. On a scale of 0 to 10, I would rate my life 8.

2. What makes you happy?

R.V.: I don't really know, just as I do not know why I am in good health. Of course, you know what you like, and often that gives you a good idea about what makes you happy. Still, such guesses can be misleading. Most parents for instance love their children, but research shows that parenthood makes most Germans a bit less happy. You do not easily see the side effects (such as a less romantic marriage) and missed alternative lifestyles (such as a more rewarding work life). All in all, I know from my studies that happiness depends on three determinants: genetic endowment, environmental conditions and individual behavior.

3. But what is the actual meaning of happiness?

R.V.: The word 'happiness' has several meanings, for instance: Living a good life from the perspective of morality. I use it in the meaning of 'life-satisfaction'.

4. How did you become a scientist for happiness?

R.V.: I got interested as a sociology student as I wanted to know what kind of society produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of citizens. To answer that question, I started gathering the available research – which was not much at that time, in the 1960s. Today my World Database of Happiness involves some 20,000 research findings. Concerning national happiness, I found that income-inequality does not depress average happiness and that the quality of government does raise average happiness. Another exceptional finding is that parents are not happier than non-parents. I also discovered that happiness doesn't depend on your intelligence quotient (IQ) but does depend strongly on social intelligence.

5. But how can something so subjective as happiness be empirically researched and measured?

R.V.: Since happiness is something that is in the mind, it can be measured by using questions – such as: 'Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please indicate with a number between 0 (dissatisfied) and 10 (satisfied).' The answers given are then combined with information on possible causes, such as genes, environment and behavior. This way, we can get a view on the conditions for happiness.

6. People say that happiness often lies in the small things of life. What is your explanation for this idea?

R.V.: The evaluation of life as a whole draws mainly on how well we feel most of the time and that depends partly on the repeated enjoyment of little things such as a good breakfast, sound sleep, nice contacts or a well decorated home. In my studies so far I haven't focused on how clothes could make us happy, but in my opinion nice underwear could be a part of the little enjoyments we treasure.



7. Do you recommend that we should become more aware of these little things in life?

R.V.: I think many people are sufficiently aware. Yet, some people might profit from awareness training that helps you be more aware of experiencing the 'Here and Now'. You can also be trained in the awareness of small things as well as learning to appreciate particular subjects, such as wine and the arts. However, as yet there is little scientific evidence that knowledge gained from these learning courses really add to happiness.

8. So, referring to your research: Which nation is the happiest?

R.V.: Average happiness is currently highest in Denmark, closely followed by Switzerland. Happiness tends to be higher in countries that are rich, democratic, well-governed and high in mutual trust. Denmark does slightly better in all of these points than neighboring nations.

About Ruut Veenhoven

Ruut Veenhoven is an emeritus-professor of social conditions for human happiness at Erasmus University Rotterdam in The Netherlands. He founded the "World Database of Happiness" (<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>), which gathered some 20.000 research findings on happiness. Veenhoven is also founding editor of the "Journal of Happiness Studies". In addition to his publications on happiness, Veenhoven's research on love, marriage and parenthood have also been published.