

HAPPINESS

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The study of happiness has long been a playground for philosophical speculation. By lack of empirical measures of happiness, it was not possible to check propositions about the matter. In the late 20th century, 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.

Concept

Originally, the word happiness denoted good luck, but nowadays it is used for subjective enjoyment of life and is synonymous with *life-satisfaction*. A common definition of happiness is 'the overall appreciation of one's life-as-a-whole'. Psychologists often refer to this matter as 'subjective well-being'.

Components

In evaluating our life, we draw on two sources of information: affective experience and cognitive comparison. The degree to which positive affects outweigh negative ones is called *hedonic level of affect*. The degree to which life is seen to meet standards is called *contentment*. Affective experience typically dominates in the overall evaluation of life.

Measurement

Since happiness is something we have in mind, it can be measured using single direct questions. An example of a survey question on overall happiness is:

Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you currently with your life as a whole?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Dissatisfied									Satisfied

Components of happiness can also be measured in this way. Hedonic level of affect can further be measured using Experience Sampling Methods. All measures of happiness are listed in the 'Item bank' of the World Database of Happiness, and linked to research findings obtained with them.

How happy are we?

In 2005 the average response to the above question was 7.6 in the USA. The highest score was observed in Denmark (8.2) and the lowest in Zimbabwe (3.3). The world average is about 6. So, most people are happy. Still not everybody is

equally happy, e.g. 13% of the Americans rated 5 or lower, while 16% ticked 10. All research findings of this kind are in the collection 'Happiness in Nations' of the World Database of Happiness.

What determines happiness?

Most of these differences in average happiness across nations are due to quality of society. Not surprisingly, people live happier in nations that provide a good material standard of living, safety, freedom and justice. What may surprise is that people live also happier in modern individualistic society than in traditional collectivistic societies and that average happiness is not lower in nations where income disparities are great. Together, these societal characteristics explain about 75% of the observed differences. Social conditions for human happiness are fairly universal.

Social factors explain less of the differences in happiness within modern western societies. Only some 10% can be attributed to income, education and social rank. Some 15% seems to be due to strikes of good or bad luck, while about 30% is in genetic make-up. A big deal of the difference seems to be in learned 'art-of-living' skills, such as social intelligence. The new 'positive psychology' aims at identifying these aptitudes and finding ways to enhance them. Research results are summarized in the collection 'Correlational findings' of the World Database of Happiness.

Can happiness be fostered?

Some believe that happiness is relative and that chasing after it will get you as far as a mouse in a treadmill. Others say that happiness is a fixed trait and as such is practically unchangeable. Research shows, however, that happiness can indeed be raised lastingly. Average happiness has gone up in most of the contemporary nations over the last 40 years and long-term follow-up studies have shown that we do not adapt to everything, e.g. not to the loss of a child.

Should happiness be fostered?

For some, happiness is the greatest good and should we aim at greater happiness to the greater number of people. Many religions see this differently and place more value on human suffering. Research into facts cannot determine whether enjoying life is morally better than suffering from it. Research statistics do offer some insight into the consequences of viewpoints and show to what extent seeking happiness meshes with other values. In this connection research was carried out into the extent to which happiness brings out the good or the bad in people. It appears that happiness does not breed contented cows, but rather activates people. Happiness 'broadens' our scope and helps to 'build' up resources. Another striking result is that happiness is good for your health and that happy people live longer. Happy people are also better citizens; they need fewer scapegoats, give more of themselves for social organizations and are, perhaps, more sensible voters. In short, fostering happiness gives more than just a more pleasant life. In a number of ways, subjective happiness can make life objectively better as well.

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