FOR A BETTER QUALITY-OF-LIFE

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I was born in 1942 in The Netherlands, during World War II, when my country was under German occupation. I have no memories of that war, but I do remember several vestiges of it. As a child I played in the ruins of bombed housing blocks near my home and I had Sunday school in what had been a synagogue, its members had been gassed. The city where I lived had been former part of the German's Atlantic Wall and remnants of this fortification were all over the place, such as bunkers and an anti-tank ditch. These things fascinated me but I was hardly aware of the tragedies behind them. I grew up in the safe post war era in an upper middle class family. My parents were both university-educated, my father a historian and my mother an economist. My father worked as a history teacher, my mother was a homemaker when I was young and worked later as a journalist. I was the eldest of three children.

Becoming an Academic

I had never dreamed of being a scholar, but became one. As a youngster I did not do too well in school and an academic career was therefore one of the last thing to think of. Still in adolescence I was much concerned about my future career. Although I had no specific occupation in mind, I felt the urge to achieve something. This drive was partly motivated by the fear of failing; class-consciousness was still pretty strong in the 1950s and I did not want to stay behind to my parents. Another driving force was the protestant ethic I was raised in; I felt obliged to improve the world in some way. My parents were both involved in social action, my father in right-wing politics and my mother in the consumer movement. I liked to hear them talk about what went on and I also took an interest in the wider political issues of that time, such as the unification of Europe and de-colonialization. In the 1960s, my political interest was strengthened in response to the call for social reform that pervaded the era. So having completed secondary school and compulsory military service, I wanted to prepare for a career in policy making.

Why Sociology?

My initial plan was to study law and specialize in public administration. Then I heard that it was also possible to specialize on policy making in sociology, so I found out all I could about this new discipline. What I found out was a nice surprise. Sociology seemed much more interesting than law and also more useful, because it addressed social problems

directly. Sociology also helped me to make sense of the different world I had encountered in the army. The first sociological texts I read really illuminated these experiences.

So I decided to study sociology and enrolled at the then Netherlands School of Economics in Rotterdam which had just started a policy oriented department of sociology. I began my studies in 1964 when the department was in its second year. Professors were few and inexperienced, but the subject matter met my expectations. I worked hard and performed well.

Academic Job

Two of the papers I wrote as a student were published in academic journals. The first was a review of research on family characteristics and educational success of children, which I did as an assignment in my third year. The study taught me that I had had a good start in my rising middle class milieu with a university educated homemaking mother. The second paper was published in my last year and in it I reviewed the then scarce research literature about happiness. In both cases my professors advised me to submit my work.

Another thing that pushed me towards the scholarly track was the shortage of teaching staff at that time. Lots of students streamed in, while the number of graduates was still low. Hence well performing students were hired for teaching chores and I was one of them. From my third year on I assisted in the course on empirical sociology and was even charged with some lectures. I still remember my first lecture. At that time it was still the custom that students stood up when a professor entered the lecture room. The room were I lectured had wooden theater seats, which clapped when tipping up, so my entrance was accompanied by the rattling of tipping chairs. "Sit down please," I heard myself saying.

The shortage of staff also meant that several graduates were offered jobs in the department. Again I was one of them, but since I was from the second year, the available positions as assistant professor in sociology were already occupied. Still there was a position left with the newly appointed professor in social psychology Rob Wentholt. He asked me to take the job and I accepted.

I was still not aiming at an academic career at that time. I merely accepted the position because it would enable me to write a dissertation and then enter the labor market as a PhD. However, things worked out otherwise. The dissertation took much longer than expected and it also took me time to become proficient in psychology. Meanwhile I discovered that my paid job at the university combined well with voluntary social action and academic work also appeared to be more rewarding than I had expected. So, finally, I decided to accept that I was a scholar, something I had been for quite a while.

Social Action

From an early age, I have been involved in clubs and on committees. I liked the game and sometimes found myself seeking a cause.

Student Activism

In my years as a university student I served on several boards and was editor of the local student magazine. Inspired by my mother's work in the consumers union, I engaged in interest representation for students. Universities were pretty overcrowded in the 1960s and teaching was often poor. I was on the student council and organized a university wide student survey on the quality of courses. This almost cost me my job as a student-assistant.

Though militant in interest representation, I was a moderate in wider politics. In the late 1960s many of my fellow-students radicalized and the newly established structures for interest representation became platforms for revolutionary agitation. In my first year as an assistant professor, a student revolt took place, which involved the occupation of buildings and chaotic meetings with mass voting. One of the issues at stake was student power (one man, one vote) and another was educational reform involving the abolition of exams and lectures. I then found myself in the middle between conservative professors and anarchistic students and was despised by both parties. It was fascinating to see this movement blaze out of hand, but it was difficult to understand the phenomenon. My sociological knowledge felt short but I found more clues in the social psychology that I had started to teach.

Sexual Reform
I was more wholeheartedly involved in the movement for sexual reform that also began in the 1960s. Though late in my own sexual development, I was early in joining the sexual reform association. I got involved through student matters, such as the sale of condoms in university buildings and overnight stays in student houses. This brought me into wider issues, such as the taboo on premarital sex, restrictions on pornography and the discrimination of homosexuals. All this changed quickly in my country and in retrospect I witnessed the 'sexual revolution.'

At that time, it was fairly evident to me that the repression of sexuality created a lot of problems, but I could not understand why we had come to restrict this natural drive so much. What function did the taboo serve? Who benefited from it? Again I found no good answers in the sociology of those days, but recent reading in macro-sociology has shown me its logic in agrarian society. In this light I realize that I had fought a cultural lag and also understand why the case was so easily won.

Abortion
One of the aims of the sexual reform movement was to repeal the law that criminalized abortion. There was a great demand for abortion at that time, unwanted pregnancies being rampant due to ignorance about sex and lack of good contraception, the pill was not yet available. Several of my fellow students had to marry prematurely and I myself was almost also hit by that fate. My girlfriend got pregnant, but we managed to escape forced marriage through an illegal abortion. It was not easy to find a doctor, it cost us a lot of money and involved some risk, but the abortion allowed us to start a family at a time of our choice, which was five years later.

This personal experience gave me the case I was looking for. I committed myself to abortion law reform, in the expectation that this would be a life task. I plunged into the literature on the matter and informed myself about lobbies in other countries such as the British Abortion Law Reform Association. In the context of my studies in sociology I made an analysis of the position on abortion of government agencies and political organizations in The Netherlands. I was amazed to find mostly ignorance and indecision and ended up in wondering why this problem, that wrecked the personal lives of so many citizens, had not reached the political agenda.

A few months later I heard about a plan to open an abortion clinic in Rotterdam. It was an initiative of medical doctors involved in family planning, who had hoped that the mere announcement of this intention would press local hospitals to make more use of the

possibilities provided for in the law. I joined the group and took responsibility for a campaign to mobilize political support. In that campaign I applied what I had learned about lobbying and pressure groups in my sociology study. Hundreds of organizations were asked to back us publicly, professional associations, churches, political associations and women's groups. We also started to raise money and asked newspapers and magazines to place free advertisements. This brought about a landslide of publicity and discussion, which in the end resulted in a decision by the city council of Rotterdam to support the clinic financially. Abortion was still illegal and could then only be justified as a medical decision, comparable to the amputation of an infected limb to save a person's life. However flimsy this legal basis, it was enough to set up a policy of 'toleration', a common form of conflict resolution in Dutch political culture. We opened in 1971 and soon six more abortion clinics were established in the Netherlands.

It took more time to adjust the abortion law to this new reality. Abortion had become a symbolic issue and this made it difficult to reach a political compromise. This political stalemate left us the room to develop the technique and to create a network of abortion clinics that also served other countries in Western Europe. The clinics were organized in an association, one task of which was to guarantee quality treatment and another to lobby for a better abortion law. I chaired the association for twelve years and in that position I benefited much from my training as a sociologist. One of the things I had learned was that information is important in pragmatic policy making and therefore we invested much in research. We ran many quantitative studies about the characteristics of our clients and how they did after treatment and we did also qualitative studies on failed contraception and remorse. On the basis of this evidence we could expose myths and frame discussions. The law was finally revised in 1984 and legalized the situation of abortion on demand that had been created thirteen years earlier. The Dutch example facilitated abortion law reform in other European nations and the social problems of unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion have ceased to exist.

Voluntary Childlessness
Through my involvement in abortion and contraception I became aware of the problem that people may start a family without really wanting children. Renouncing parenthood had become technically possible after the introduction of the pill in the late 1960s, but was not yet socially accepted in the mid 1970s. I saw this as a social problem, because of my concern about overpopulation and the wellbeing of unwanted children. I estimated that an attitude campaign might be helpful and I had seen a good example in an American organization of non-parents. Together with members of the sexual reform association I established an information center about voluntary childlessness, which over a period of ten years produced a stream of information about the pros and cons of having children or not. We made books, video documentaries, information leaflets and instructions for educators. This information was greedily picked up by the media and by ladies journals in particular. Voluntary childlessness is now widely accepted, but is still not seen as something praiseworthy.

Research
I like doing research and devoted ever more time to it. In the 1970s, my research paralleled my social action, and was mainly about abortion, childlessness and family issues. Since then I have concentrated on the study of happiness.

Abortion
My first empirical investigation was a survey among medical doctors. The study served to estimate the number of unwanted pregnancies in The Netherlands and assessed the support for law reform in the medical profession. The study was part of a wider attempt to bring abortion on the political agenda. When this had happened I was commissioned to carry out a literature study about the probable consequences of free abortion. This study dealt with medical risks, effects on mental health and with demographic and social consequences. One of the questions was whether the repeal of the abortion law would lead to moral decay. Later I also supervised many studies performed for the association of abortion clinics, among other things about trends in abortion and contraception and about strategies for prevention of unwanted pregnancy. Much of this research served to denounce misinformation about abortion and to gain the upper hand in the pragmatic policy discussions.

Having Children
Couples who consider missing out on children are often confronted with the idea that this will violate an innate need for offspring, in particular the 'mother instinct' in females. If childlessness goes against a real need, this must manifest in childless couples thriving less well. I checked this hypothesis in a secondary analysis of a health survey, but found no differences in self reported health, psychosomatic complaints, perceived meaning of life and happiness. The childless couples were actually doing somewhat better (Veenhoven 1975). In later studies I found that the birth of children lowers happiness somewhat, mainly because of its effect on marriage (Veenhoven 1984a). I have also considered the fate of only children. Do these grow up as unhappy eggheads? The data show that this is not the case (Veenhoven 1989). As part of my advisory activities I have also been involved in publications that address wider issues, such as the costs of children, the timing of children and adoption. All this was meant to correct negative stereotypes and to enable people to make well-informed decisions.

Happiness
One of the reasons to opt for sociology was the expectation that this study would teach me how to improve society. Hence I was eager to learn what a good society is like. Much to my disappointment my professors could not provide a clear answer to that question. I was told that there are different views and that subjective evaluation is unscientific. Marxist fellow-students told me another story and maintained that a good society is a socialist one, even if its members fail to realize this. I found the idea that the best society is the one that creates the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' more appealing; it was something I had heard in a social philosophy course. This consequential ethic made more sense to me than the ideological crazes of those days and I thought that it should be possible to assess happiness outcomes empirically.

I had just learned how concepts such as 'power' and 'prestige' can be measured and could not see why happiness would not be measurable. It took some time to discover that some things called happiness are indeed immeasurable, but that happiness in the sense of overall life satisfaction is something that we have in mind and that this can be assessed using questionnaires. On the basis of that insight I wrote a paper in which I took stock of the available research on the matter. That was not very much in 1968 and the available data only gave information on differences within society, while my main interest was to compare across societies. Still the mere approach was enough to get the paper published in a Dutch sociological journal.

In the years after my graduation I used the concept of happiness in several discussions, but I did not really focus on the matter. In the debate on abortion I claimed that repeal of the restrictive law would prevent much unhappiness of unwilling parents and unwanted children, though I could not really prove that. In the discussion about voluntary childlessness I claimed that forsaking children does not make life less gratifying and in this case I could substantiate the claim empirically (Veenhoven 1975). I have also used data on happiness in discussions about the future of marriage. In response to the claim that marriage is on the return in modern society, I showed that the married are typically happier than the unmarried and that this apparent impact of marriage had grown over time (Veenhoven 1983).

Life Goals and Happiness
My teaching work in social psychology raised my interest in individual differences in happiness, and in the possibilities of increasing individual happiness through training and advises. My boss and PhD supervisor was a psychologist and this was another reason to shift the focus. I decided to do my PhD on the relation between life goals and happiness to prove that planning of one's life pays. I had intellectual arguments for this supposition, but the main reason was that I am a planner myself and assumed that people would be happier if they were more like me. One of my specific hypotheses was people with clear goals in mind function more fully and effectively and that they are therefore happier. Another hypothesis was that some goals are more conducive to happiness than others and in particular that people who aim at success in zero sum games are less happy on an average.

I tested these hypotheses in a laborious investigation where life-goals were assessed using a self-designed sentence completion test and happiness was assessed using daily records of mood. I did find the expected difference in object of goals but found no greater happiness among people with clear goals. After three years of work I realized that the cross-sectional design of my investigation was not appropriate and that the effects of life-goals on happiness can only been shown in a follow-up. All in all the study was not good enough for a PhD dissertation. I buried the manuscript in a drawer and reverted to my earlier approach of taking stock of research on happiness.

Conditions for Happiness
Meanwhile, the research literature on happiness had expanded. While I had found only some 20 empirical studies in 1968, I found about 500 in 1980. I set out to describe the results of that research systematically with the purpose of creating an evidence base for policy interventions aiming at greater happiness for a greater number. For that purpose I

sharpened my definition of happiness and on that basis selected acceptable measures of happiness. I then discovered that many studies that claim to assess happiness or life-satisfaction actually measure something else, mostly a mix of mental health and contentment. Only half (245) of the empirical studies in my collection appeared to fit my concept.

From the reports of these studies I extracted all the findings, both distributional findings and correlational findings. I described the findings one by one in a standard terminology and then sorted them on country and subject. Thus I stripped the findings from the reports in which they had been presented. All these findings were gathered in the voluminous *Databook of Happiness* (Veenhoven 1984a), which then served as the basis for another book entitled *Conditions of Happiness* (Veenhoven 1984b) Together these works served as my PhD dissertation.

Conditions of Happiness provides a synthesis of the research on happiness up to the early 1980s. It takes stock of observed facts. Unlike most literature reviews it does not consider the interpretations the original investigators attached to these findings. It is more a meta-analysis than a narrative review.

Two kinds of conditions for happiness are discerned: external environmental conditions and inner psychological conditions. The environmental determinants discussed are characteristics of the society one lives in and the position one holds in that society. Inner psychological determinants are health, personality lifestyle, aspirations and convictions. At the time the findings did not allow a view on interdependencies between environmental and inner determinants of happiness.

World Database of Happiness

I kept on keeping stock of the research findings on happiness and published an update in the early 1990s. This involved a bibliography (Veenhoven 1993a), a book about happiness in nations (Veenhoven 1993b) and three volumes about correlational findings (Veenhoven 1994b). In the late 1990s the collection was entered in an electronic database, called the 'World Database of Happiness,' and made available on the web (http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl). The database involves the following inventories:

- Bibliography: Contains publications on subjective appreciation of life, even if this is a side issue. It involves a subject classification. Current contents about 5000 titles.
- Item bank: Contains all acceptable measures of happiness ever used and links to the findings obtains with these. Current contents: about 600 measures, mainly single questions.
- Distributional findings: About 3000 findings about happiness in general population samples in 122 nations over the period 1946-2005 and about 2000 findings on average happiness in special publics, such as the elderly or homo-sexuals.
- Correlational findings: About 10.000 findings on variables that go with more and less happiness, such as age and income.
  Described in standard abstracts and ordered on subject and methodology

The maintenance of this database requires a lot of work, and money is tight. Part of the work is done by volunteers, in the beginning mainly students and unemployed sociologists and currently foremost retired people from different backgrounds. One of them is Henk DeHeer, an IT specialist and old friend who built the data system. My university facilitates

the volunteers with office room and equipment.

Good Society
What has all this taught me about the good society? First that people thrive well in modern individualized society (Veenhoven 2005c) and flourish better than in traditional collectivist societies (Veenhoven 1999). Secondly, I learned that the greatest happiness for the greatest number is achieved in nations that allow their citizens most freedom, are best governed, and have a democratic system (Veenhoven 2000a, 2004, 2005a). Much to my surprise the amount of welfare services provided by the state does not make a difference (Veenhoven 2000b) and neither does the degree of income inequality in the nation. The findings are more in line with the liberal political agenda than with the social-democratic one.

This begs the question of why not everybody is equally happy in modern society. The sociological reflex is to point to social position, but that appears to explain at best 10% of the differences in happiness within modern nations. About 40% of the difference is in the ability to cope with the problems of life, people who are psychologically well equipped for life in multiple-choice society having the advantage (Veenhoven 2001a). That psychological factors count so much does not mean that living conditions are irrelevant to happiness, but rather that social conditions are pretty good in modern society. This is also reflected in the limited role of sheer luck. Life events beyond one's control explain only some 15% of the differences in happiness[1].

Social Inequality
I also learned that social inequality is less of a problem in modern societies than most sociologists think. As mentioned above, comparison across nations shows no more happiness in nations where income inequality is low than in comparable nations where it is high, while comparison within countries shows only small differences in happiness between poor and rich citizens. Gender differences appear to matter more, average happiness being higher in nations where women are more equal to men.

Another unexpected finding is that that inequality is still diminishing in modern society. I discovered that when I used the standard deviation of happiness as indicator (Kalmijn and Veenhoven 2005a) and considered the trend over time. Disparities in happiness appeared to have diminished in all modern nations over the last thirty years (Veenhoven 2005a), independent of the modest rise in the average level of happiness (Veenhoven 2006a).

Reception of My Work
My work on abortion and childlessness received much attention from the media, not in the least because it had been produced for that purpose. My findings on happiness are also well covered by the press. In the case of abortion I am pretty sure that it has influenced policy decisions, but with respect to happiness I cannot tell as yet.

I met with more reservation among colleague sociologists, and in particular among those on boards that decided on my applications for research funding. Recently I got a cold shoulder from two sociological journals,[2] rejecting my paper on lessening inequality of happiness in modern nations (Veenhoven 2005a). I consider the paper's findings to be a major discovery, but the specialist referees saw it as heresy and came up with all the misunderstandings about happiness that recent research has refuted. The main problem is

theoretical: sociologists tend to see happiness in terms of social construction and relative deprivation and therefore discount the matter as whimsical and culturally relative (Veenhoven 2006b). This blinds them for the evidence that happiness is a sign of human thriving, comparable to physical health, and hence a good indicator for the apparent livability of social institutions (Veenhoven 1996, 2000c).

I see this as a passing problem and I am confident that the subject of happiness will find its place in mainstream sociology. What bothers me more is that there is little institutional backing for this subject; there is much curiosity about happiness, but not many organizations that have an interest in paying for the research. Hence the study of happiness will depend very much on scarce academic money.

International Cooperation
My earlier research on abortion and family issues was mainly meant for the domestic market and involved therefore little exchange with colleagues in other countries. However, my research on happiness does involve much international cooperation, not only do most of my data come from other countries, the users are also scattered all over the world.

My ticket to the international research community was the book *Conditions of Happiness* (Veenhoven 1984b). I had submitted that book to Reidel Publishers (now Springer Press), a company that publishes many scholarly journals, among which *Social Indicators Research*. Initially the manuscript landed on the desk of the philosophy editor, who rejected it, but finally it found its way to Alex Michalos, editor of *Social Indicators Research*. He helped me through and also introduced me to the working group Social Indicators Research of the International Sociological Association. That proved to be a fine bunch of people and a place where various networks met. Today this working group is closely connected to the International Association for Quality of Life Studies, in which psychologists and economists also participate.

Initially, *Social Indicators Research* was the major outlet for papers about happiness. When the number of submissions on this subject grew, I proposed that the publisher should start a separate journal on happiness. This came to be called the *Journal of Happiness Studies,*[3] of which I am an editor together with Alex Michalos (University of Northern British Columbia, Canada), Ed Diener (University of Illinois, USA) and Bob Cummins (Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia). The journal started in 2000 and is doing well. At this moment several new scholarly journals on quality of life are in the making.

My *World Database of Happiness* is an international clearing-house for information on happiness. I have contacts with many of the deliverers, that is, colleague investigators who inform me about their work and check whether I enter their findings correctly. I do not get to know all the users well, but I know there are many and that most of them are scholars. For all of us, the directory of investigators on happiness[4] is a means to keep in touch with one another.

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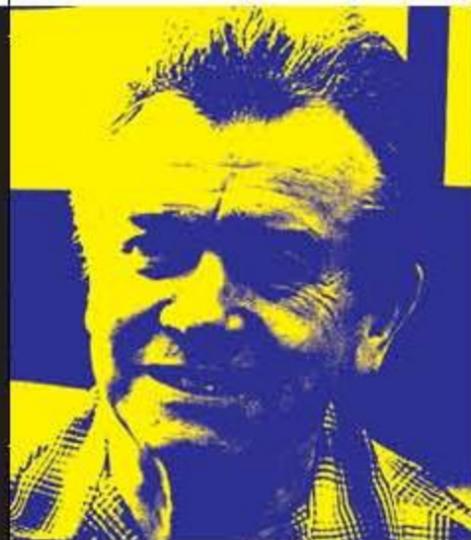
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Notes

[1] See Headey, B., and Wearing, A., 1992, *Understanding Happiness: A Theory of Subjective Wellbeing*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, Australia.

[2] *Netherlands Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review*.

[3] Available on http://www.springerlink.com

[4] This directory is part of the World Database of Happiness. It provides address information and links to publications in the bibliography of happiness.

[5] Papers are available for download online at: http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven

Sociologists in a Global Age

Biographical Perspectives

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