

# GREATER HAPPINESS FOR A GREATER NUMBER

## Is that possible? If so, how?

Ruut Veenhoven,

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning (Sheldon et al. 2000). Happiness is not the same as optimal functioning but is a closely related phenomenon. Happiness is a major manifestation of optimal functioning, since we are hard-wired to feel good when functioning well (e.g. Balcombe 2006). Happiness is also a determinant of optimal functioning, since happiness “broadens” our behavioral repertoire and “builds” resources (Fredrickson 2004). Consequently, happiness is a major topic in positive psychology. Much research in positive psychology aims at understanding why some people are happier than others and tries to find ways for making people happier. As such, the *science* of positive psychology links up with the *ideology* that we should foster human happiness.

The idea of a moral obligation to advance human happiness is a fruit of the European “Enlightenment,” an intellectual movement that took position against religious views that had dominated thinking in the Middle Ages. One of the contested views was that happiness can be found only in the afterlife and that earthly life serves as an entrance test to Heaven. Enlightened opinion was rather that happiness is possible on Earth and that we should not renounce it. Another contested view was that the basis of morality is in divine revelation, and in particular in the 10 Commandments. Enlightened thinkers came to see morality more as a matter of human agreement and discussed the intellectual foundations for social contracts. Much of this thought was voiced by Jeremy Bentham (1789) in his famous book *On Morals and Legislation*, in which he argued that the good and bad of actions should be judged by their effects on human happiness. In this view, the best thing to do is what results in the “greatest happiness, for the greatest number.” This moral creed is called “the greatest happiness principle.”<sup>1</sup>

This secular ideology met much resistance. In the 18th century the opposition came mainly from the churches, which were still quite powerful in those days. In the 19th century there was also opposition from the liberal and socialist emancipation movements that were more interested in freedom and equality than in happiness. In the early 20th century much opposition came from the then-virulent nationalism that laid more emphasis on glory of the nation than on the happiness of its inhabitants. All these ideologies lost power in the late 20th century, and partly for that reason the greatest happiness principle made a comeback. The recent emergence of positive psychology is part of that long-term ideological shift.

The ideological opposition against the greatest happiness principle gave rise to several intellectual arguments, some of which draw on assumptions about reality. One of these arguments is that “great happiness” is hardly possible in the human condition and that “greater happiness” is fully out of reach. Another argument holds that attempts to further happiness nevertheless will bring us from the frying pan into the fire because of the various negative side effects of happiness and its pursuit.

In this chapter I will first deal with the question as to *whether* greater happiness is possible,

*Correspondence:* Prof. Dr. Ruut Veenhoven Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
P.O.B. 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, Netherlands. [www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven](http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven)

and I will do so by taking stock of the available evidence. Next I will deal with the question of *how* happiness can be furthered, and this requires a look ahead. Before entering these questions I must first explain what I mean by the word “happiness.”

## 2 WHAT HAPPINESS?

The word “happiness” has different meanings, also in the realm of positive psychology. In the widest sense, “happiness” is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like “well-being” or “quality of life.” Below I will delineate four qualities of life and show that my concept of happiness fits only one of these.

### 2.1 Four Qualities of Life

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. That classification is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (2000a). The first distinction is between chances and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between “external” and “internal” features. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in [scheme 1](#).

#### *Livability of the Environment*

The left top quadrant denotes the meaning of good living conditions, shortly called “livability.” Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and describe it in terms of pollution, global warming, and degradation of nature. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, traffic jams, and ghetto formation. In the sociological view, society is central. Livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole and also with the position one has in society.

Livability is not what is called happiness here. It is rather a precondition for happiness, and not all environmental conditions are equally conducive to happiness.

#### *Life-Ability of the Person*

The right top quadrant denotes inner life-chances. That is, how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life Sen (1992) calls this quality-of-life variant “capability.” I prefer the simple term “life-ability,” which contrasts elegantly with “livability.”

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is “health” in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as “negative health.” Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as “positive health” and associated with energy and resilience. A further step is to evaluate capability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new skills for living. This is commonly denoted by the term “self-actualization.” Since abilities do not develop alongside idleness, this quality of life is close to the “activity” in Aristotle’s concept of eudemonia.

Ability to deal with the problems of life will mostly contribute to happiness as defined here, but it is not identical. If one is competent in living, one has a good chance at happiness, but this endowment does not guarantee an enjoyable outcome.

#### *Utility of Life*

The left bottom quadrant represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes some higher values. There is no current generic for these external outcomes of life. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to these effects as “transcendental” conceptions of quality of life. Another appellation is “meaning of life,” which then denotes “true” significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler “utility of

life,” while admitting that this label may also give rise to misunderstanding.

When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider several aspects. One aspect is what that life does to the quality of life of other people, such as how well a mother raises her children. Another aspect is contribution to human civilization, such as in inventions or moral behavior. Still another aspect is what a life does to the ecological system. An individual’s life can have many environmental effects that may differ on the short term and in the long term, which cannot be meaningfully added.

Leading an objectively useful life may contribute to the subjective appreciation of life, but may also go at the cost of that.

#### *Core Meaning: Subjective Enjoyment of Life*

Finally, the bottom right quadrant represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective enjoyment of life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as “subjective well-being,” “life satisfaction,” and “happiness” in a limited sense of the word. This is the kind of happiness Jeremy Bentham had in mind, and it is also the kind of happiness addressed here.

## **2.2 Four Kinds of Satisfaction**

Even when we focus on subjective satisfaction with life, there are still different meanings associated with the word happiness. These meanings can also be charted in a fourfold matrix. In this case, that classification is based on the following dichotomies: life-aspects versus life-as-a-whole, and passing delight versus enduring satisfaction. These distinctions produce the fourfold matrix presented in [scheme 2](#).

#### *Pleasure*

The top-left quadrant represents passing enjoyments of life-aspects. Examples would be delight in a cup of tea at breakfast, the satisfaction of a chore done, or the enjoyment of a piece of art. I refer to this category as “pleasures.” Kahneman (1997) calls it “instant-utilities.” The concept of happiness used here is broader and concerns “overall satisfaction” with life-as-a-whole. Though fleeting enjoyment obviously contributes to a positive appreciation of life, it is not the whole of it.

#### *Domain Satisfaction*

The top right quadrant denotes enduring appreciation of life-aspects, such as marriage satisfaction and job satisfaction. This is currently referred to as domain satisfactions. Though domain satisfactions depend typically on a continuous flow of pleasures, they have some continuity of their own. For instance, one can remain satisfied with one’s marriage even if one has not enjoyed the company of the spouse for quite some time.

Domain satisfactions are often denoted with the term happiness: a happy marriage, happy with one’s job, etc. Yet I use the term happiness in the broader sense of satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. One would not call a person happy who is satisfied with marriage and job but still dissatisfied on the whole because his health is failing. It is even possible that someone is satisfied with all the domains one can think of but nevertheless feels depressed.

#### *Peak-Experience*

The bottom right quadrant denotes the combination of passing experience and appraisal of life-as-a-whole. That combination occurs typically in peak-experiences, which involve short-lived but quite intense feelings and the perception of wholeness. This is the kind of happiness poets write about.

Again, this is not the kind of happiness aimed at here. A moment of bliss is not enduring appreciation of life. In fact, such top-experiences even seem detrimental to lasting satisfaction, possibly because of their disorientating effects (Diener et al., 1991).

*Core Meaning: Lasting Satisfaction with One's Life-as-a-Whole*

Lastly, the bottom-right quadrant represents the combination of enduring satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. This is what I mean with the word happiness. A synonym is "life satisfaction." This is the meaning at stake in Jeremy Bentham's "greatest happiness principle." When speaking about the "sum" of pleasures and pains, he denoted a balance over time and thus a durable matter.

### 2.3 Definition of Happiness

In this line I define happiness as *the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favourably*. In other words: how much one likes the life one leads. I have elaborated this concept elsewhere (Veenhoven, 1984, ch. 2).

### 2.4 Different Use of the Word in Positive Psychology

Martin Seligman (2002) uses the word happiness in a broader sense. In his "Authentic Happiness," he distinguishes between: the *engaged life*, the *meaningful life* and the *pleasant life*. His notion of the "engaged life" belongs in the top right quadrant of **scheme 1**, and his notion of the "meaningful life" fits the bottom left quadrant. His notion of the "pleasant life" belongs in the bottom right quadrant and fits my concept of happiness.

Another common distinction in positive psychology is between *eudaimonic happiness* and *hedonic happiness* (Ryan & Deci 2001). The notion of "eudaimonic" happiness concerns the use and development of human capabilities and as such in belongs in the top right quadrant of **scheme 1**. The notion of "hedonic happiness" belongs in the bottom right quadrant of **scheme 1**. As such it fits my concept of happiness. Yet when reduced to mere "pleasure," the notion of "hedonic happiness" belongs in the top left quadrant of **scheme 2** and does not fit my concept of happiness as life satisfaction in the bottom right quadrant of that scheme.

## 3 TAKING STOCK

Is the pursuit of greater happiness for a greater number illusionary indeed? And are attempts to foster happiness doomed to be counterproductive? By lack of data these questions could not be answered in Bentham's days. Today we can do better. Social scientists have found that happiness can be measured using questions about life satisfaction and have applied such questions in large-scale surveys of the general population. In this section I take stock of the evidence for and against using the research findings gathered in the World Database of Happiness<sup>2</sup> (Veenhoven, 2009).

### 3.1 Great Happiness Possible?

Several philosophers have claimed that enduring happiness is not possible in the human condition, e.g. Schopenhauer (1851), who maintains that we can at best reduce suffering somewhat. Freud (1948) saw little chance for happiness either, in particular not in modern society that requires inhibition of primitive urges. Likewise, several social scientists believe that happiness depends on comparison and infer on that basis that happiness will oscillate around a neutral level (e.g. Unger 1970, Brickman & Campbell 1971).

*Empirical Indications*

Research findings do not support these pessimistic theories. Most people are happy, at least in modern society (Diener & Diener 1996). That appears from their responses to the question: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays? Please indicate in a number from 0 to 10, where 0 is 'extremely dissatisfied' and 10 'extremely satisfied.'" The responses to this question in the UK are depicted in **Scheme 3**. More than 40%

of the British rate their life with a number of 7 or higher and less than 20% with a 5 or lower. Studies that use slightly different questions have yielded similar results. The average “school mark” the British give for their life is currently 7,2.

How does British happiness rank in comparison to other nations? Some illustrative findings are presented in [scheme 4](#). Though the UK is in the middle of this list, it is actually in the top range of the world. As one can see, average happiness varies between 8,4 (Denmark) and 3,3 (Zimbabwe), and with 7,0 the USA ranks high in that five-point interval.

Average happiness is much lower in developing nations, and in particular in African “failed states” such as Zimbabwe. As a result the world average is also lower. Though full data are lacking, the current world average is between 5 and 6 on a scale of 0 to 10. This is not great happiness, but the cases of Denmark and Switzerland indicate that great happiness is possible.

### *Theoretical Plausibility*

In a functional perspective, it is also unlikely that we are doomed to unhappiness. Happiness is part of our monitoring system and typically tells us whether we are doing well or not. As such, we feel happy when our basic needs are being met and unhappy when these are thwarted (Veenhoven 2009b). In this view happiness must be the rule rather than an exception.

## **3.2 Greater Happiness Possible?**

Can we become happier than we are now? Again, several scientists think not. Some psychologists maintain that happiness is largely inborn or at least embedded in stable personality. Hence education for happiness will not make citizens any happier, and neither will social progress. This view is known as the “set-point” theory (e.g., Lykken 1999). Some sociologists draw the same conclusion because they think that happiness depends on social comparison and that you are not better off than the neighbours if conditions for everybody improve. In that vein, the case of the USA is often mentioned as an example; material wealth would have doubled there since the 1950s while average happiness seems to have remained at the same level (e.g., Easterlin 1995). Yet these scientists are wrong, both empirically and theoretically.

### *Empirical Indications*

There is a clear relation between average happiness and societal quality. Think of the case of Zimbabwe in [scheme 1](#), where this country is at the bottom with an average of 3.3. Apparently, people cannot live happy in a failed state, even if their neighbours suffer the same. The correlations in [scheme 5](#) show that this is no exception, with differences in quality of society explaining about 80% of the variation in average happiness in the present-day world.

Average happiness *has* changed in most nations, and typically for the better (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). [Scheme 6](#) depicts a gradual rise of happiness in Denmark over the last 30 years and a dramatic fall of average happiness in Russia following the ruble crisis in 1995. Clearly, happiness is not fixed to a set point!

[Scheme 6](#) illustrates also that greater happiness is possible in most nations of the world. Average happiness is currently highest in Denmark, with an average of 8.2. What is possible in Denmark should also be possible in other countries. Don’t object that Danish happiness is a matter of genetic endowment or national character, because [scheme 6](#) shows that happiness has improved in Denmark since 1973.

Present-day happiness in Denmark may be close to the maximally possible level. If so, there is still a long way to go for most nations of this world, since the world’s average is now lower than 6. If we might ever reach the maximum of average happiness, there is still the possibility to extend its duration and create more happy life years for a greater number (Veenhoven, 2005).

So much for average happiness of all citizens in society—how about the chances of an individual getting happier in the given societal conditions? Follow-up research has shown that some people get happier over their lifetime and others less (e.g., Erhardt et al., 2000). Lyubomirsky et. al (2005b) estimate that about 40% of the differences in happiness within modern society is due to intentional activity of individuals, and only some 10% to circumstances beyond their control.

### *Theoretical Underpinning*

The erroneous idea that greater happiness is not possible has roots in erroneous theories about the nature of happiness. One of these mistaken theories is that happiness is merely a matter of outlook on life and that this outlook is set in fixed dispositions, which are part of individual personality as well as of national character. Another faulty theory is that happiness results from cognitive comparison, in particular from social comparison. Elsewhere I have shown that these theories are wrong (Veenhoven, 1991, 1995).

My alternative theory of happiness holds that we appraise life on the basis of affective information in the first place. We experience positive as well as negative affects; in appraising how much we like the life we live, we assess to what extent the former outbalance the latter. This theory fits Bentham's concept of happiness as "the sum of pleasures and pains." In my view, positive and negative affects signal the gratification of basic human needs, so in the end happiness is determined by need gratification. I have discussed this theory in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven, 2009b).

### **3.3 Greater Happiness Desirable?**

Not everything that is possible is also desirable, so the next question is whether we should try to create greater happiness for a greater number. In Bentham's view this is a moral obligation, but his view is contested, as we have seen.

Some of the objections come from preachers of penitence who like to see us suffer for cleansing our sinful souls. Yet there are also objections from scientists who believe that the pursuit of happiness will bring us from the frying pan into the fire. One of their qualms is that mass happiness will be achieved at the cost of freedom. Another misgiving is that happy people tend to be passive and uncreative. These notions figure in Huxley's (1932) science fiction novel *Brave New World*, in which happiness for everybody is achieved using genetic manipulations and mind control and where the happy citizens are short-sighted consumer slaves.

Yet research on the consequences of happiness shows another picture. It appears that happiness typically fosters activity, creativity, and an open mind. Happy people do better as spouses and parents. They are also better citizens; they typically inform themselves better than unhappy compatriots, and they involve more in social action while being more moderate in their political views (Lyubomirsky et. al., 2005). Happiness also lengthens life considerably, the effect of happiness is comparable to smoking, or not (Veenhoven, 2008). A negative effect of happiness is that it may make us less perceptive of risks and/or criticism by others. The evidence is about minor things, and it is not yet established whether happiness makes us also prone to a too-rosy outlook of major things.

These findings on effects of happiness fit well with the theory that feeling good works as a "go-signal"—it tells the organism that the situation is OK and that it can go ahead. Consequently, happy people "broaden" their behavioral scope and "build" more resources (Fredrickson, 2004). So happiness is not only worth pursuing for its own sake, but also for its positive side effects.

## 4 MOVING FORWARD

### How Can Happiness Be Raised?

So, greater happiness for a greater number is possible, how then can that be achieved? I see possibilities at three levels: (1) at the macro-level of society, (2) at the meso-level of organizations, and (3) at the micro-level of individual citizens.

#### 4.1 Macro-Level: Improving the Livability of Society

Happiness depends heavily on the quality of society. As we have seen in [scheme 4](#), there are wide differences in happiness across nations, and these differences are clearly linked to societal qualities, some of which are presented in [scheme 5](#).

##### *Wealth*

Will further economic growth make us happier? [Scheme 5](#) suggests so, because happiness is strongly correlated with wealth of the nation. Yet material affluence appears to be subject to the law of diminishing returns, and economic growth yields more happiness in poor nations than in rich nations. This is not to say that economic development does not add to happiness at all in rich nations. Happiness is still on the rise in affluent nations, and it is well possible that this rise is linked to economic growth, directly or indirectly. We simply don't know yet.

Still another reason to keep the economy going is that the play may be as important as the prizes. Happiness is found not only in consumption but also in productive activity. Like most animals, we have an innate need to use our potentials. The biological function is to keep us sharp, in the human case in particular to keep the brain in shape. The human species evolved in the conditions of hunter-gatherer existence that involved a lot of challenge. In the conditions of present-day industrial society, we still need some challenge and we find that now mainly in work life. In this perspective, we had better not follow Layard's (2005) advice to discourage economic competition, though there is a point in keeping that competition nice and leaving room for other arenas in society.

##### *Equality*

The data in [scheme 5](#) do not suggest that reduction of income differences will add to happiness; the correlation is close to zero, and when wealth of the nation is taken into account we see even a positive effect of inequality. Though income inequality may be unfair, we can apparently live with it (Berg & Veenhoven, 2010). This is not to say that income inequality does not affect happiness at all; it most likely means that the evident negative effects of income inequality are balanced, by not so evident positive effects.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the data do not suggest that happiness can be advanced by more welfare state. At first glance there is some correlation between expenditures for social security and happiness in nations, but the statistical relationship disappears when we take into account that big-spending nations tend to be richer. For illustration: happiness is fairly high in Sweden, which is known for its extended welfare state, yet equally high in Iceland, which spends much less on social security (Veenhoven, 2000b; Ouweneel, 2002).

This is not to say that happiness is insensitive to all inequalities, since [Scheme 5](#) also shows a strong negative relationship between average happiness and gender-inequality in nations. This latter kind of inequality links up with differences in freedom across nations.

##### *Freedom*

The case of freedom fits better with intuition, [scheme 5](#) showing sizable correlations with three kinds of freedom. The effects differ between poor and rich nations: Among poor nations, happiness appears to be most affected by economic freedom. Hence, in these nations, open-market policies will probably add to happiness. Among rich nations, the correlation with political freedom is more pronounced, and this suggests that there is happiness to win by

further democratization. Illustrative in this vein is that in Switzerland, average happiness was found to be somewhat higher in the cantons, where the threshold for referenda is lowest (Frey & Stutzer, 2000).

### *Institutional Quality*

The greatest gains seem to be possible in the realms of justice and good governance. The correlations in **scheme 5** show that people live happier in nations where human rights are respected and where there is rule of law. Reversely, people live less happy in nations where corruption is common, even in cultures where favouritism is morally accepted. Likewise, people live happier in nations where government institutions function properly, irrespective of the colour of the political parties in the saddle. This effect is also independent of culture; rather than a Western ideology, good governance appears to be a universal prerequisite for happiness (Ott, 2009).

## **4.2 Meso-Level: Improving the Livability of Institutions**

Another source of happiness is the institutional settings in which we spend most of our time, such as work and school. Systematic improvements in those realms will probably add to the happiness of a great number of people.

This requires that we know what settings produce the most happiness, e.g., in what kind of schools pupils enjoy their school years most. Curiously, that has hardly been investigated as yet, not even in nursing homes, the prime product of which is happy life years. There is a lot of talk about quality of life in institutions, but hardly any hard research. This is probably because there is little incentive to bother about happiness of pupils and residents.

Governments can create an incentive by instigating research on the happiness output of institutions. Once differences are visible, the market will do its work. For instance, parents will prefer a school where most children are happy over a school where the majority are not, even if the latter school produces higher grades.

There is some research on happiness in work organizations, much of which is summarized by Warr (2007). Still, this strand is small compared to the large literature on job satisfaction and health at work. Another limitation is that most of the research is cross-sectional, and for that reason does not inform us about cause and effect in the relation between happiness and work. What we need is follow-up studies of comparable people in different institutional settings. Research on “positive institutions” is on the agenda of positive psychology, and I hope that we will know more in a couple of years.

## **4.3 Micro-Level: Helping Individuals to Live Happier**

Happiness can be furthered at the individual level in at least three ways: (1) training art-of-living skills, (2) informing people about the probable outcomes of major life choices, and (3) professional guidance in self-development and life choice. Below I will expand on these possibilities, since they are particularly relevant for positive psychology. My aim is to sketch the options, and for that reason I will not review all that is going on in the fields.

### *4.3.1 Training Art-of-Living Skills*

Many people think that they would be happier if they had more money or a higher position on the social ladder. However, research shows that these things do not matter very much, at least not in affluent and egalitarian societies. Differences in income and social status explain only some 5% of the differences in **scheme 1**. Current images about conditions for happiness are misleading.

What then does matter for happiness? About 10% of the differences can be attributed to social relations, in particular to a good marriage. Another 10% is due to good or bad luck, probably more so in countries where life is less predictable. Most of the difference appears to



be due to personal characteristics; about 30% can be attributed to variation in life-ability (Heady & Wearing, 1990).

The relative importance of inner strengths should not be surprising if we realize that living conditions are typically very good in modern nations; the better the external conditions, the less they account for differences in happiness. In paradise, all the differences in happiness will be due to inner competence, neurotics quarreling with angels. In Hell, the differences in happiness (if any) will largely be determined by closeness to the fire, because nobody can stand that environment. So the most evident way to advance happiness is to strengthen life-abilities.

Some of these abilities are genetically determined or hardly alterable for other reasons. Still, there are also capabilities that can be improved through therapy and training. Psychotherapy is now well established in modern nations, but still underutilized. There is also an emerging field of training in art-of-living. "Art-of-living" is the knack of leading a satisfying life and, in particular, the ability to develop a rewarding lifestyle (Veenhoven, 2003). This involves various aptitudes, some of which seems to be susceptible to improvement using training techniques. There is a growing literature on that matter. Four of these aptitudes are: (1) the ability to enjoy, (2) the ability to choose, (3) the ability to keep developing, and (4) the ability to see meaning.

*Learning to Enjoy:* The ability to take pleasure from life is partly inborn (trait negativity-positivity) but can to some extent be cultivated. Learning to take pleasure from life was part of traditional leisure-class education, which emphasized prestigious pleasures, such as the tasting of exquisite wines and the appreciation of difficult music. Yet it is also possible to develop an enjoyment of the common things in life, such as eating breakfast or watching the sunset. Training in savoring simple pleasures is part of some religious practices.

Hedonistic enjoyment is valued in present-day modern society and figures prominently in advertisements. Yet techniques that help us to gain the ability to enjoy are underdeveloped.

There are no professional enjoyment trainers, at least no trainers aiming at improving our general level of enjoyment. There is professional guidance for specific types of pleasures, such as how to appreciate fine arts; often the main goal is to sell a particular product.

Still, it would seem possible to develop wider enjoyment training techniques. One way could be to provide training in "attentiveness," possibly using meditation techniques. This approach fits current programs on "mindfulness" (e.g. Jacob & Brinkerhoff, 1999). Another option could be the broadening of one's repertoire of leisure activities, which could link up with expertise in various stimulation programs. A third way could be looking at ways to remove inner barriers to enjoy, which could be linked to clinical treatment of a-hedonie.

*Learning to Choose:* Happiness depends also the choices one makes in life and hence on one's ability to choose. The art of choosing involves several skills.

One such skill is getting to know what the options are. This aptitude can be improved by learning, and this is one of the things we do in consumer education. Expertise in this field can be used for training in the charting of wider life options. Another requirement is an ability to estimate how well the various options would fit one's nature. This requires self-knowledge, and that is also something that can be improved, self-insight being a common aim in training and psychotherapy. Once one knows what to choose, there is often a problem of carrying through. This phase requires aptitudes such as perseverance, assertiveness, and creativity, all of which can be strengthened and are in fact common objectives in vocational trainings.

The next step in the choice process is assessing the outcomes in term of the above-mentioned distinction, assessing whether "expected utility" fits "experienced utility." This phase calls for openness to one's feelings and a realistic view of one's overall mood pattern. Training in mood monitoring is a common practice in psychotherapy and could possibly be improved using techniques of experience sampling.

*Learning to Grow:* Happiness depends largely on the gratification of innate “needs,” and an important class of needs is “growth needs” (Maslow, 1954), also referred to as “functioning needs” or “mastery needs.” These needs are not restricted to higher mental functions but also concern the use and development of the body and senses. In animals, the gratification of these needs is largely guided by instinct, but in humans it requires conscious action. Cultures typically provide standard action patterns for this purpose, such as providing for vocational career scripts, but people must also make choices of their own, in particular in multiple-choice societies. Failure to involve oneself in challenging activities may lead one into diffuse discontent or even depression; this, for example, happens regularly after retirement from work. Thus another art-of-living is to keep oneself going and developing. This approach fits a strand of research on goal setting and happiness (e.g. Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

Intervention would also seem possible in this case. Mere information will probably be useful, and one can also think of various ways to get people going. Once again training techniques can build on available experience, in this case experience in various activation programs. There is already an ample supply of “growth trainings” on the peripheries of psychology, but as yet little evidence for the effectiveness of such interventions and certainly no proof of long-term effects on happiness.

*Helping to See Meaning:* There are indications that happiness also depends on one seeing meaning in one’s life (e.g., King et al., 2007). Though it is not sure that we have an innate need for meaningfulness as such,<sup>4</sup> the idea of it provides at least a sense of coherence. Seeing meaning in one’s life requires that one develops a view of one’s life and that one can see worth in it. These mental knacks can also be strengthened, and one can learn to live with the philosophical uncertainties that surround this issue.

There is experience on this matter in existential counselling and in practices such as “life reviewing” (Holahan & Wonacott, 1999) and “logo therapy” (Frankl, 1946). As far as I know, the impact of such interventions on happiness has yet to be investigated.

The problem is not so much to develop such training techniques, but to separate the chaff from the corn. That will require independent effect studies, but effect studies are scarce in this field and are typically not carried out independently of the trainers. Reports of this research are highly selective and tell more about short-term success than about long-term significance. As a result, consumers are uncertain about the quality of trainings and for that reason are reluctant to buy such services. In economic terms: the (poor) market supply does not meet the (large) consumer demand. Once training techniques have been proven to be effective, a viable market will develop that will generate income for many psychologists and enhance the happiness of many people.

#### 4.3.2 *Information: Enabling More Informed Choice*

Happiness depends to some extent on the choices we make in life, in particular in modern “multiple-choice societies”. Life choices are for the most part based on expected happiness; for instance, we typically choose a profession we think we will like. Economists call this “expected utility” or “decision utility” and acknowledge that this may differ from later “experienced utility,” because decisions are made mostly on the basis of incomplete information (e.g., Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). An example of mal-informed choice is the decision to accept a higher-paying job that requires more commuting. People typically accept such jobs in the expectation that the extra money will compensate for the travel time, but follow-up research has shown that they are mostly wrong and that happiness went down (Frey & Stutzer, 2004).

Research of this kind can help people to make more informed choices. Though there is no guarantee that things will pan out in the same way for you, it is still useful to know how it has worked out for other people. Such research is particularly useful if it concerns similar people.

This approach to the furthering of happiness is similar to current evidence-based health education. As in the case of happiness, we are often not sure about the consequences of lifestyle choices on our health. How much drinking is too much? Is eating raw vegetables really good for your health? We cannot answer such questions on the basis of our own experience, and common wisdom is often wrong. Hence, we increasingly look to the results of scientific studies that provide us with ever more information, the results of which are disseminated systematically.

As yet, the information basis for such a way of furthering happiness is still small. Although there is a considerable body of research on happiness, this research is typically cross-sectional and does not inform us about cause and effect. What we need is panel data that allow us to follow the effects of life choices over time. Still another problem is that current happiness research deals mainly with things over which we have little control, such as personality and social background. What we need is research on things we can choose, for example, working part-time or full-time or raising a family or not. For this purpose the “Happiness Monitor” project ([www.risbo.org/happinessmonitor](http://www.risbo.org/happinessmonitor)) follows a large number of people in The Netherlands, using an attractive internet site and yearly calls. Parallel studies in other countries are welcome.

Once such information becomes available, it will quickly be disseminated to the public through the lifestyle press and self-help literature. It can also be included in organized health education, broadened to become education for “living well.” The problem is not in the dissemination of knowledge, but in the production of it.

This way of promoting happiness does not involve paternalism; it does not push people into a particular way of life, but it provides them with information for making a well-informed autonomous decision. Paternalism would be involved only if research is manipulated or its results communicated selectively—for instance, if the observed negative effects of parenthood on happiness are disguised.

#### 4.3.3 *Life Coaching*

If we feel unhealthy, we go to a medical general practitioner, who makes a diagnosis and either prescribes a treatment or refers us to a medical specialist. If we feel unhappy, there is no such generalist. We have to guess about the possible causes ourselves and on that basis consult a specialist who may be a psychologist, a marriage counsellor, or a lawyer. This is a remarkable market failure, given the large number of people who feel they could be happier.

The size of the demand is reflected in the booming sales of self-help books and the willingness to pay for things that promise greater happiness, such as cosmetic surgery and second homes.

Currently, there are quite a few people who present themselves as life coaches or counselors, and many of them are members of organizations affiliated with the positive psychology movement. Yet their clientele is quite small and their impact on average happiness is negligible. Why doesn't the life coach equal the medical general practitioner? In my view, the main reason is in the above-mentioned lack of a knowledge base. Since we do not really know what trainings work for what kind of people, life coaches cannot refer to a specialist and therefore treat clients themselves on the basis of intuition. Likewise, coaches cannot provide evidence-based advice on matters of life choice, since follow-up research on this matter is still in its infancy.

What can life coaches do to foster the development of the required knowledge base? One of the ways is following the effects of their own practices. This would require that a substantial number of life coaches agree to refer all their clients to a long-term follow-up

study by a university or an otherwise respected and impartial scientific body. Clients should provide some basic information at intake, among which their current state of happiness and the things for which they seek advice. Next, clients should periodically report their happiness, e.g., every month for a couple of years. This can be done on the Internet, and clients should be sure that their responses are not communicated to the counselor. Counselors in turn should report their diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis, without their clients knowing. The resulting database will allow us to see what interventions work for what kind of people and is likely to stimulate more focused research. Participation in such a study could be one of the requirements for chartering in this profession. The above mentioned “Happiness Monitor” can be used in that context.

#### **4.3.4 In Short:**

Professional furthering of the happiness of individuals requires more research, long-term follow-up studies in particular.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In academic philosophy, this moral principle is known as “utilitarianism.”

<sup>2</sup> The World Database of Happiness is a collection of research findings on happiness as defined in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Though inequality in incomes is not related to *average* happiness in nations, it is slightly related to *inequality* of happiness in nations, the standard deviation of happiness tending to be greater in nations where income differences are greatest.

<sup>4</sup> The search for meaning seems to be universal, but this does not necessarily mean that this is an innate need. The quest for meaning can also be a consequence of the fact that we can think and therefore cannot avoid wondering what our life is good for. If so, that would explain why we can live without a convincing answer to that question.

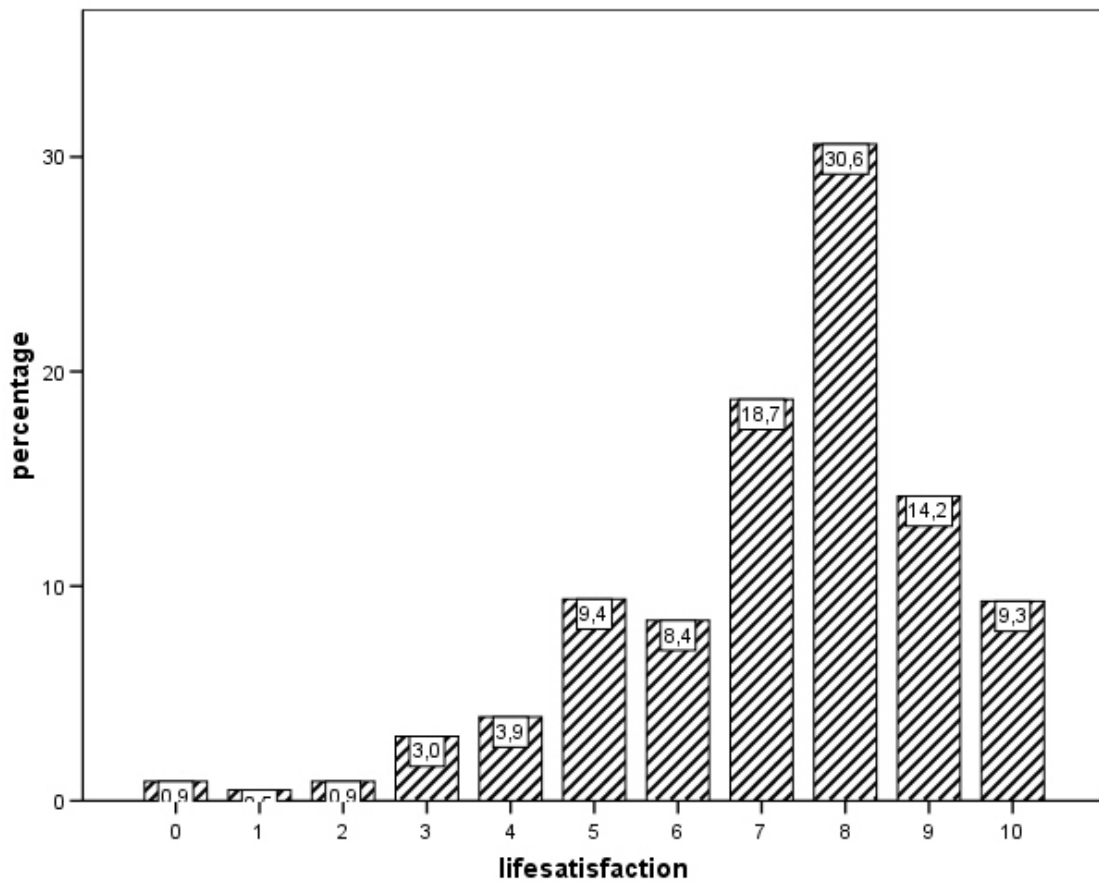
**Scheme 1****Four qualities of life**

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life-chances</i>	<b>Livability of environment</b>	<b>Life-ability of the person</b>
<i>Life-results</i>	<b>Utility of life</b>	<b><u>Satisfaction</u></b>

**Scheme 2****Four kinds of satisfaction**

	<i>Passing</i>	<i>Enduring</i>
<i>Part of life</i>	<b>Pleasure</b>	<b>Domain satisfaction</b>
<i>Life-as-a-whole</i>	<b>Peak-experience</b>	<b>Life satisfaction (happiness)</b>

**Scheme 3**  
**Happiness in the UK**



Data: European Social Survey 2006

**Scheme 4****Happiness in nations around 2005: Average on scale 0-10**

Denmark	8,4
Switzerland	8,1
Mexico	8,0
Sweden	7,7
Canada	7,6
<b>UK</b>	<b>7,3</b>
Germany	7,2
USA	7,0
France	6,5
China	6,3
Japan	6,2
India	5,9
Russia	4,4
Iraq	4,3
Zimbabwe	3,3

Adapted from: World Database of Happiness, Happiness in Nations, Rank Report Average Happiness (Veenhoven 2009c)

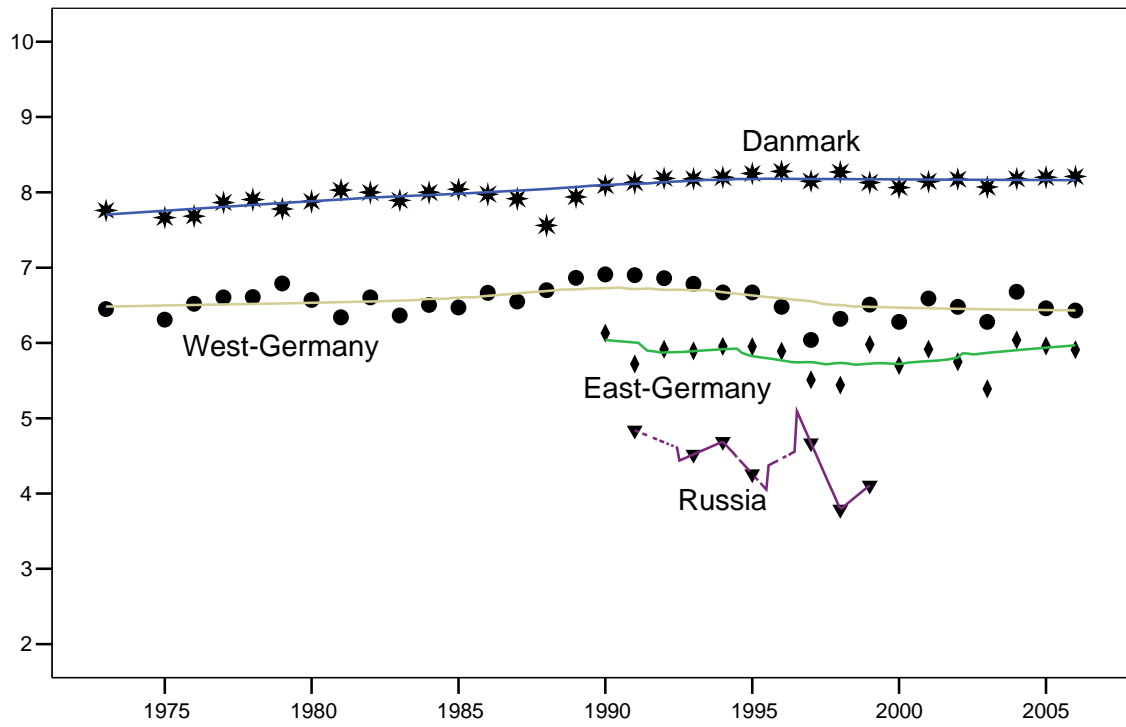


**Scheme 5**  
**Societal correlates of happiness**

Condition in nation	Correlation with average happiness		
	<i>Zero-order</i>	<i>Wealth Controlled</i>	<i>N</i>
<b>Wealth</b>			
• Purchasing power per head	+ .65		88
<b>Freedom</b>			
• Economic	+ .60	+ .26	88
• Political	+ .48	+ .17	90
• Personal*	+ .35	- .13	83
<b>Equality</b>			
• Inequality of incomes	+ .05	+ .42	82
• Discrimination of women	- .52	- .25	58
<b>Brotherhood</b>			
• Tolerance	+ .52	+ .40	76
• Trust in compatriots	+ .39	+ .17	79
• Social security	+ .35	- .16	66
<b>Justice</b>			
• Rule of law	+ .64	+ .20	90
• Respect of civil rights	+ .47	+ .09	90
• Corruption	- .56	- .03	62
<b>Explained variance</b>	83%		60

Adapted from: World Database of Happiness, data file "StatesOfNations\_2008," (Veenhoven 2008b)

**Scheme 6**  
**Trend average happiness in three nations**



Source: World Database of Happiness, data file TrendsInNations\_2007 (Veenhoven 2007)

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