

# GREATER HAPPINESS FOR A GREATER NUMBER

## Is that possible? If so, how?

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What is the final goal of public policy? Jeremy Bentham (1789) would say: *greater happiness for a greater number*. He thought of happiness as subjective enjoyment of life; in his words as “the sum of pleasures and pains”. In his time, the happiness of the great number could not be measured and it was therefore difficult to assess how happiness can be furthered and whether attempts to do so were successful or not. Hence happiness remained a subject of philosophical speculation. 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. The results of this research are gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2007).

### 1 HOW HAPPY ARE WE?

Most inhabitants of modern society are happy. 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 1 to 10, where 1 is ‘dissatisfied’ and 10 ‘satisfied’. The responses to this question in a typical Arab country (Jordan) are depicted in [scheme 1](#).

#### *Rank of happiness in nations*

How does Jordan rank in comparison to other nations in other parts of the world? Some illustrative findings are presented in [scheme 2](#). As one can see average happiness varies between 8,4 (Denmark) and 3,9 (Zimbabwe). Arab countries are found in the top ranks (Saudi Arabia) as well as at the bottom (Egypt).

#### *Trend of happiness in nations*

Survey research on happiness started in the late 1940s and took off in the early 1970s. Until recently, it was difficult to discern a pattern in the data; changes over time tend to be small and the view on the trend is often blurred by minor variations in sampling and questioning. Now that we have more and better data, a pattern of rising happiness emerges (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006).

### 2 IS GREATER HAPPINESS POSSIBLE?

Can public policy create greater happiness? Several scientists think not. Some psychologists maintain that happiness is largely inborn or at least embedded in stable personality. Hence a better society will not yield happier citizens. 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 neighbors if conditions for everybody improve. 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 3.9. Apparently people cannot live happy in a failed state, even if their neighbors suffer the same. The correlations in [scheme 4](#) show that this is no exception, differences in quality of society explaining about 65% of the variation in average happiness in the present day world.

Average happiness *has* changed in most nations, and typically to the better (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006). [Scheme 3](#) depicts a gradual rise of happiness in Denmark over the last 30 years and a dramatic fall of average happiness in Zimbabwe. Clearly, happiness is not fixed to a set-point! [Scheme 3](#) illustrates also that greater happiness is possible in most nations of the world. Average happiness is currently highest in Denmark, with an average of 8.4. 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 3](#) 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 about 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).

### *Theoretical underpinning*

The erroneous idea that greater happiness is not possible 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 Veenhoven (1991, 1995) has shown that these theories are wrong.

An 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 and 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 this view, positive and negative affects signal the gratification of basic human needs, so in the end happiness is determined by need gratification (Veenhoven 2009).

## **3 HOW CAN HAPPINESS BE RAISED?**

Apparently, greater happiness for a greater number is possible, then how can that be achieved? We 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.

### **3.1 Macro level: Improving the livability of society**

Happiness depends also on the quality of the wider society. As we have seen in [scheme 2](#), there are wide differences in average happiness across nations, and these differences are clearly linked to societal qualities, some of which are presented in [scheme 4](#).

Will further economic growth make us happier? **Scheme 4** 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 not only found in consumption, but also in productive activity. Like most animals we have an innate need to use our potentials. The biological function of that need 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 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 arena's in society.

The data in **scheme 4** do not suggest that reduction of income differences will add to happiness, the zero-order correlation is close to zero and when wealth of the nation is taken into account we see even a positive effect of income inequality. Though income inequality may be unfair, we can apparently live with it. Likewise, the data do not suggest that happiness can be advanced by more welfare state. At first sight 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 that is known for its extended welfare state, yet equally high in Iceland that spends much less on social security (Veenhoven 2000, Ouweneel, 2002)

The greatest gains seem to be possible in the realms of freedom and justice. Good governance also appears to contribute much to average happiness in nations, irrespective of the political color of the parties in the saddle.

#### *Role of education*

In **scheme 4** we can also see that average happiness is consistently higher in nations where people are well educated. A substantial positive correlation remains when wealth of the nation is controlled and this indicates that education adds to happiness in more ways than just making money.

### **3.2 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 in work and school. Systematic improvements in those realms will probably add to average happiness in the nation.

This requires that we know what settings produce 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 old age 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 investigating 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 is not, even if the latter school produces higher grades.

### 3.3 Micro level: Helping individuals to live happier

Happiness can be furthered at the individual level in three ways 1) training art-of-living skills, 2) informing people about the probable outcomes of choices and 3) professional guidance in self-development and life-choice. Below we expand on these options, since they are particularly relevant for positive psychology.

#### 3.3.1 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](#).

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 and Wearing 1990). The relative importance of inner strengths should not surprise if we realize that living conditions are typically very good in modern nations; the better the external conditions, the less variations at that level account for differences in happiness. In Paradise, all the difference in happiness will be due to inner competence, neurotics quarreling there with Angels. So the most evident way to advance happiness in developed societies is to strengthen life-abilities.

Part of these abilities is genetically determined or hardly alterable for other reasons. Still, there are also capabilities that can be improved though therapy and training. Psychotherapy is now well established in modern nations, but still under-utilized. 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 life-style (Veenhoven 2003). This involves various aptitudes, some of which seems to be susceptible to improvement using training techniques. 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 in-born (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. Yet it is also possible to develop an enjoyment of the common things in life, such as 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 and 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. 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 also 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 on one's overall mood pattern. Training in mood monitoring is common practice in psychotherapy and could possibly be improved using computed based techniques of experience sampling.

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. Once such techniques have been proven to be effective a market culture will develop.

*Learning to grow:*

Happiness depends largely on the gratification of basic 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 or artistic interests 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.

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:*

Probably, but not certainly, happiness also depends on one seeing meaning in one's life. Though it is not sure that we have an innate need for meaningfulness as such, 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 possible one can also learn to live with the philosophical uncertainties that surround this issue. There is experience on this matter in existential counseling 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.

*Role of education:*

Several of these interventions can be incorporated in school curricula. There are now several initiatives for lessons in happiness in secondary education and these issues can also be integrated in more established health education in schools. Interestingly, the individual level correlation between happiness and education tends to be small, in particular in developed nations. This indicates that school could do better than they do now.

**3.3.2 Information: Enabling more informed choice**

Another way of improving happiness at the individual level is informing people about the consequences of major choices in life. Realize that we live in a 'multiple-choice-society' in which about 40% of the differences in happiness seems to be due to 'intentional activity' (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky (2004: 131). Better informed choices will give rise to greater happiness. In that context governments could broaden 'Health education' to 'Happiness education'. Like in the case of health education there should be a solid evidence base, and good data about consequences of life choice are lacking at the moment.

What we need is follow-up studies on changes in happiness following life-decisions such as having a baby, moving to another country or early retirement. Such studies can show what has happened earlier to people like us who did what we consider to do now. If making major consumer decisions we often orient on tests of the consumer union. In making life-decisions we can have a similar information basis. An example of this approach is a study by Frey & Stutzer (2004) on the effects of accepting a higher paying job at a longer distance from home. They show that a lot of people mis-predict the effect on their own happiness.

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 mostly made on the basis of incomplete information. 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 tends to go down in such cases (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 in the recent past. Such research is particularly useful if it concerns similar people. This policy 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 only be involved if research is manipulated or its results communicated selectively. For instance if the observed negative effect of parenthood on happiness is disguised (World Database of happiness, Correlational findings on happiness and having Children, WDH 2006).

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 life-style choices on our health. How much drinking is too much? Is eating raw vegetables really good for your health? We cannot answer such question 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, and 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 fulltime or raising a family or not.

Once such information becomes available, it will quickly be disseminated to the public, though the lifestyle press and the 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.

### 3.3.3 Professional life-counseling

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 counselor or a lawyer. Professional guidance for a happier life is unavailable as yet. 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. The main reason is probably that the knowledge basis for such a profession is still small and that trust in happiness counseling is undermined by the many quacks operating in this area.

Still there seems to be a future for professional counseling for a happier life and for related life coaching and trainings. There is demand for such services, but as yet no proper supply. Much can be gained by developing that supply. One of the ways is to stimulate the professionalization of current activities in that area, amongst other things by following people who use such services to establish what interventions add to happiness or do not. The development of professional life counseling could also profit from the above-advised research into long-term changes in happiness following major life-choices.

## 4 DO WE NEED GREATER HAPPINESS?

If we *can* create greater happiness for a greater number, *should* we? Several voices say 'no'. Part of the objections comes 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 involves negative effects. One of their qualms is that mass happiness will be achieved at the cost of freedom and 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 fosters activity, creativity and an open mind. Happy people do better as a spouse and parent. They are also better citizens; they typically inform themselves better than unhappy compatriots, they involve more in social action, while being more moderate in their political views. (Lyubomirsky et. al. 2005). Still another thing is that happiness lengthens life, the effect of happiness being comparable to smoking or not (Veenhoven 2008). This evidence on positive effects of happiness fits well with the theory that feeling good works as a 'go-signal', it tells the organism that that the situation is OK and it can go ahead. Consequently happy people 'broaden' their behavioral scope and 'build' more resources (Fredrickson 2004). In this context it is not surprising that happy pupils tend to do better in school.

So happiness is not only worth pursuing for its own sake, but also for its positive side effects.



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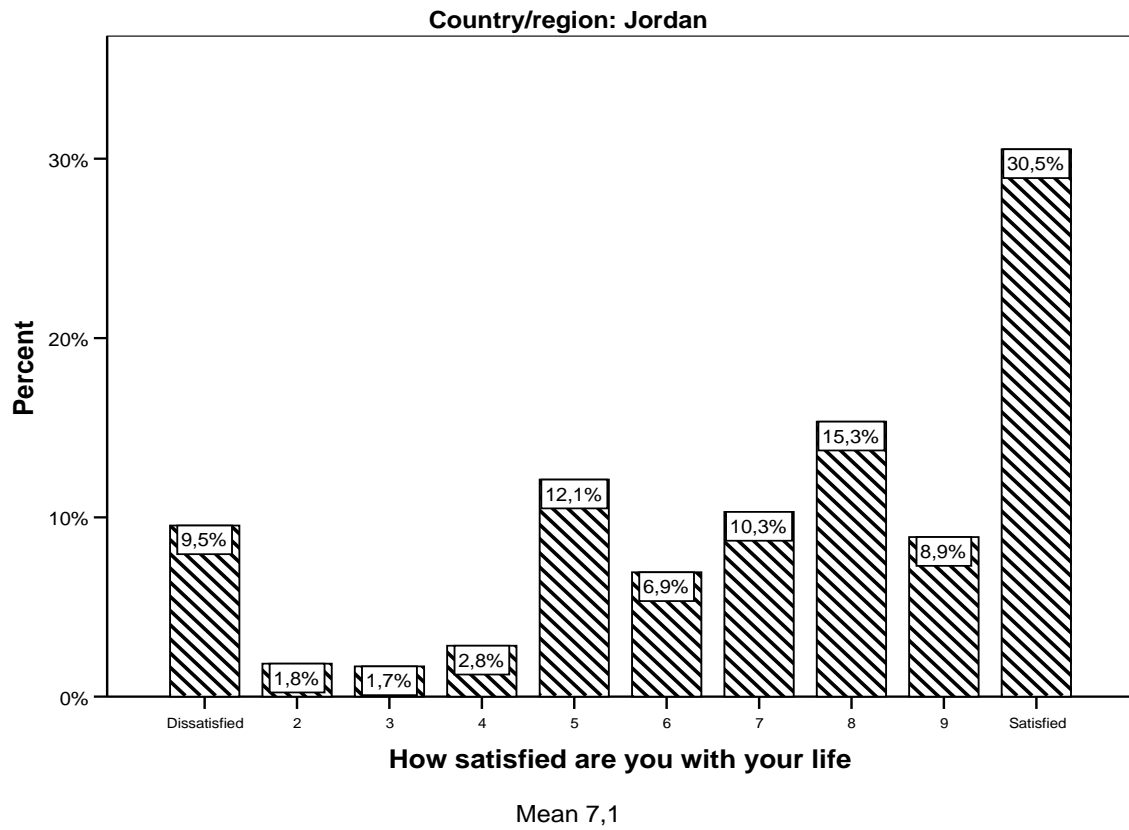
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**Scheme 1**  
**Happiness in Jordan**



Data: World Values Survey 2005

**Scheme 2**Happiness in nations around 2005; Average on scale 1-10<sup>1</sup>

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•	Denmark	8,4
•	Switzerland	8,0
•	Sweden	7,5
•	USA	7,3
•	Saudi Arabia	7,3
•	France	6,9
•	<b>Jordan</b>	<b>6,8</b>
•	Russia	6,1
•	Egypt	5,7
•	Iraq	4,5
•	Zimbabwe	3,9

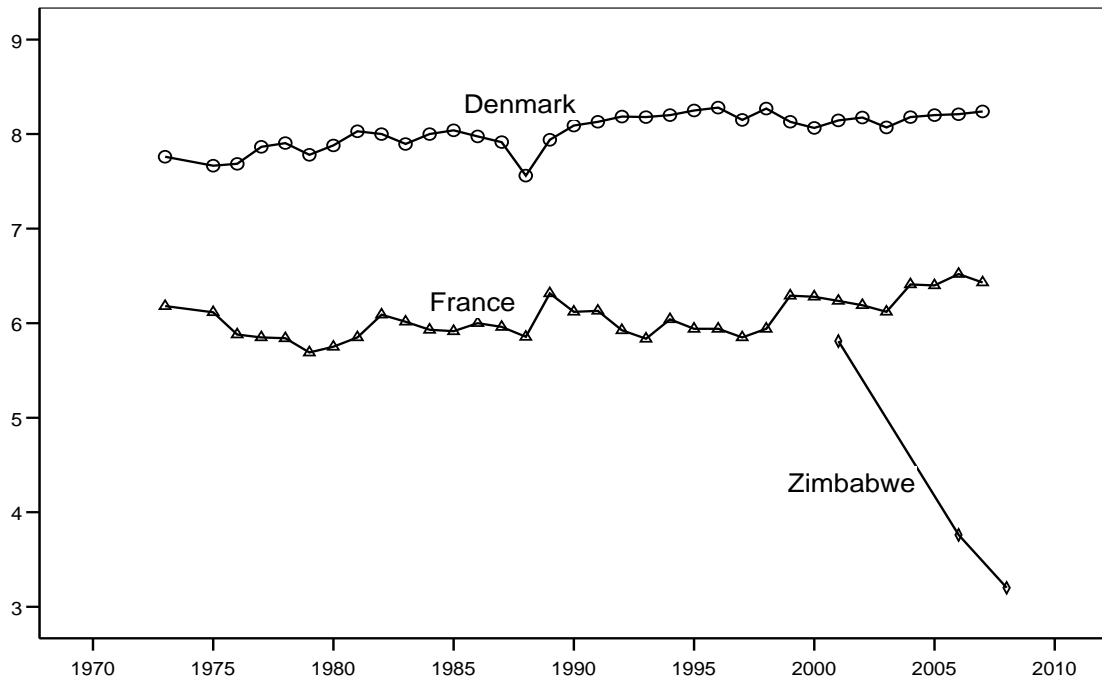
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Source: World Values Surveys

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<sup>1</sup> When transformed to range 0-10, the scores are somewhat lower. Presentation on range 0-10 is standard in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2007).

**Scheme 3**  
**Trend average happiness in three nations**



Source: World Database of Happiness, data file TrendsInNations\_2007

**Scheme 4**  
**Societal correlates of happiness around 2005**

Condition in nation	Correlation with average happiness		
	Zero-order	Wealth Controlled	N
<b>Wealth</b>			
• Purchasing power per head	+0.69	-	166
<b>Freedom</b>			
• Economic	+0.61	+0.26	123
• Political	+0.60	+0.22	134
• Personal*	+0.64	+0.16	70
<b>Equality</b>			
• Inequality of incomes	-0.08	+0.30	117
• Discrimination of women	-0.21	-0.16	108
<b>Brotherhood</b>			
• Tolerance*	+0.49	+0.37	75
• Trust in compatriots	+0.38	+0.11	78
• Social security*	+0.43	-0.03	53
<b>Justice</b>			
• Rule of law	+0.68	+0.23	139
• Respect of civil rights	+0.53	+0.12	100
• Lack of Corruption	+0.69	+0.22	135
<b>Knowledge</b>			
• Education	+0.56	+0.24	136
• Patents*	+0.07	-0.16	65
<b>Explained variance</b>	64%		66

Data: World Database of Happiness, data file 'States of Nations

\* = not included in regression due to limited number of cases