

HAPPINESS AS AN INDICATOR IN SOCIAL POLICY EVALUATIONS

Some objections considered

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Abstract

Social-policy typically serves multiple goals: shortterm goals as well as longterm goals and symbolic goals as well as substantive ones. A major longterm substantive goal of social policy is to improve the quality of life. The effectiveness of policies in that respect is mostly a matter of faith. This contribution is about some problems that rise if one tries to measure the consequences of social policy on quality-of-life.

1. MEASURES OF QUALITY-OF-LIFE

The term 'quality-of life' is used to denote two kinds of desired outcomes: it refers to 1) preconditions for a good life as well as to 2) the degree to which people actually flourish. The former meaning refers to *chances* in life, the latter to *results*. Both variants can be measured in various ways.

1.1 Measures of good living conditions

A common indicator of the quality of living conditions is *buying power*. Living conditions are seen as goods and services that can be purchased on the market. The rich are then presumed to enjoy the best chances. In this line individual quality-of-life is often measured by 'household-income' and collective quality-of-life in a country by 'GNP per head'

Since the 1960's investigators recognized that money cannot buy everything and have therefore included further conditions deemed desirable. One of these is *access to knowledge*. Well informed people are seen to be in a better position to realize their ambitions. At the individual level this is commonly measured by 'level of education'. At the nation level it is measured by indices like 'school-enrolment ratio's', 'media- attendance' and 'circulation of books', often combined in a sumscore. 'Freedom of press' is also used in this context.

Likewise *access to power* came to be included in quality-of-life measurements. Social power is seen to add to the chance of realizing ones ambitions as well. At the individual level power is measured by rather divergent indicators such as 'occupational prestige', and 'involve in organisations'. 'Income' and 'education' have also been used in this context. At the nation level asses to power is measured by various indicators of 'political rights', 'interest-organisation' and 'political participation'.

Recently *asses to intimate support* has become a topic in quality-of-life research. Contacts with friends and relatives are seen to involve important lifechances both because they protect against loneliness and mental decay and because they provide valuable services that cannot be bought on the market. At the individual level intimate support is mostly measured by the density and quality of ones 'personal network' and sometimes by perceived 'entitlements' and 'reciprocity obligations'. At the nation level lack of intimate support is sometimes measured by 'divorce rates', and 'percent of the population living in a one-person household'.

Commonly several of these indices we combined in a *quality-of-life sumscore*. For instance the famous Scandinavian Welfare Study (Allardt 1973) combines 'having' (measured by income, education, employment, health and housing), with 'loving' (measured by attachments with family, friends and community) and 'being' (measured by personal prestige, social activity and political involvement).¹ An example of a multiple QOL score at the national level is Estes' (1984) 'Index of Social Progress', which is based on country scores on i.e. economic affluence, political democracy, social equality and social peace.

The main problem with these measures is that they do not tap quality of life as such, but rather *what investigators think that is required for a good life*. The values and beliefs these investigators depart from are typically the same that underlie social policy. The living conditions that figure in QOL indicators are largely identical with the operational goals of social-policy. When applied in evaluation studies, these indicators tell us whether social policy achieved its working goals. However they do not inform us about the sense of that achievements. Though the term 'Quality-of-life' suggests that people live better, it is not at all sure that they really benefit from the extra income, power and knowledge that policymakers made available to them. In fact the successful admission of a medicine is equated with health. In order to avoid such misunderstandings policy evaluations must also consider good living as such.

1.2 Measures of good living as such

The degree to which people actually flourish in their living conditions can be measured in several ways as well.

One way is to consider *physical health*, that is whether people are free from illness or impairments and live long. Health and longevity are seen as manifestations of good biological functioning. It is believed that good physical health also reflects good psychological and social functioning. Various indices are used in this context: screening protocols as well as health-questionnaires. At the national level average life-expectancy is often used as an indicator.

Another approach is to look for indications of good flourishing in *behaviour*. If a dog does not bark or chase cats, we are inclined to say that it does not live according to its nature and hence does not flourish. Likewise it is said that humans are built to be active and interested, and able to cope realistically with their environment. Under-utilisation of these capacities is seen as poor living. The problem with this approach is that the behavioral repertoire of dogs is more limited than that of humans. Human nature allows far more variations. It is therefore quite difficult to establish which behaviours are appropriate. In some cases it is rather clear that people do not function well, for example if they act confused or fight without any reason (though such behaviour are sometimes still adaptive). Behavioral disfunctioning can to some extent be measured by indices of mental disturbance such as psychiatric screenings and surveys about life-problems. Positive functioning is assessed by surveys as well, in particular with the use of so called 'life-adjustment-scales'. Most of these scales follow Freuds suggestion that involvement in both work and love marks good functioning.

A third approach is to focus on *subjective satisfaction*. The idea is that one cannot call a life 'good' if it is not enjoyed by the one who lives it, even if that person has no reason to be dissatisfied. Satisfaction is typically measured by direct questioning. Most current in evaluation research are questions about satisfaction with specific aspects of life, such as ones work, chances to improve oneself, contacts with friends, etc. Typically the success of a policy is evaluated by the increase of satisfaction in the domain concerned. Yet satisfaction in one aspect of life may go at the cost of satisfaction in another aspect. Also can some aspects be largely irrelevant for the appreciation of life-as-a-whole. Therefore human flourishing can better be measured by their overall-life-satisfaction, also called 'happiness'. This contribution considers some problems involved in that criterion.

2. HAPPINESS AS A CRITERION IN POLICY-EVALUATION

Happiness can be defined as the 'overall evaluation of ones life-as-a-whole'. Thus defined happiness can be considered as an attitude. This concept is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven 1984 chapter 2.

Happiness is mostly measured by single direct questions such as: 'Taking all together, how happy would you say you are: very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?' Various multiple item scales have been used as well. Happiness can also be measured in more indirect ways such as by projective tests, or clinical interviews. For a review of indicators see Veenhoven 1984 chapter 3.

Current use

Happiness is sometimes used as an outcome variable in the evaluation of social policy. It figures in studies at the individual level that compare benefitors with non-benefitors as well as in studies that monitor average improvement or deterioration at the collective level: in social categories or even in national populations.

Examples of evaluation studies at the individual level that use happiness as a criterion are most numerous in aging-research. Happiness has been used to asses the effect of pre-retirement courses (Teberi, 1978), in re-location (Pino et. al 1978) and of programmes for physical- and social activation. (Ray et. al 1983, Gray and Kasteler, 1970) Several of such studies have demonstrated modest yields in happiness. Happiness figures also in the growing number of studies on the effects of psycho-therapy. Most of these studies find positive effects (McVicar & Herman 1983).

Happiness measures are further used in evaluations of policies that aim at a better life for deprived social categories. Manning-Gibbs (1972) inspected whether 20 years of Black emancipation had resulted in a greater appreciation of life among Black Americans. He found the reverse to be the case. Likewise Witt e.a. (1980) considered longterm change in relative happiness of aged persons in the USA. They observed a modest gain.

At the societal level happiness has figured in evaluations of longterm policy regimes. Easterlin (1974) considered the effect of economic growth and found that yields in affluence of the nation does not add to average happiness of its citizens: at least not in the present day first world countries. These findings are often cited by critics of growth policy such as Scitovsky (1976). I myself considered the happiness revenues of state-welfare effort and found little effect either (Veenhoven 1990). However there is good evidence that political freedom and human rights protection do contribute to a greater enjoyment of life (Veenhoven 1984 ch.5).

Objections

The use of happiness in policies this evaluation is not uncriticized. Three kinds of objections are being raised.

Firstly, several critics doubt the value of happiness as a goal and are ready to give it up for something they deem more desirable. Most feminists for example would not stop their struggle for emancipation if that would involve a lowering of the happiness of women. The moral rejection of happiness as a goal is often argued by the attribution of noxious side-effects. Happiness is said to render people lazy, hedonistic and irresponsible.

Secondly, there are claims that happiness is insensitive to progress. One of these hold that happiness is essentially 'relative' and that adjustment of comparison standards erodes the effect of change to better or worse in the long run. Another theme is that happiness is a 'trait' rather than a state and therefore does not reflect improvement.

Thirdly there are a lot of doubts about the measurement of happiness. Because happiness cannot be properly measured, real yields in happiness would fail to show up in evaluation studies.

Most of these objections are open to empirical falsification. During the last few years I checked several of them. These studies were part of a research programmeⁱⁱ under the direction of Mark van de Vall. For that purpose I used the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 1992). This data source contains empirical research findings based on indicators of happiness that meet specific validity criteria. It includes about one third of the current research literature on this subject: about 5000 correlational findings from some 750 studies. As such provides a good finding place for touchstones to the objections raised. The following paragraph present a summary of the findings.

3. THE OBJECTION THAT HAPPINESS IS NO GOOD

As noted above, one of the objections against the evaluation of social policy by its happiness returns is in the valuation of happiness itself. Two difficulties are mentioned in this context: the first is that happiness in itself is not very valuable: the second that happiness involves adverse effects.

3.1 Public valuation of happiness

The moral value of happiness has been the subject of debate since the early Greeks. Happiness rank high in Humanistic thought: the 19th century Utilitarians even proclaimed it as the ultimate moral touchstone. Other ideologies are rather skeptical about human happiness and rank it under other values. Some Christians deem religious devotion higher than happiness and many socialists of the old sort prefer social equality above personal happiness.

Ultimately the rankordering of values is a matter of taste: hence one can opt to disregard the happiness. Yet evaluation of social policy usually takes place in the context of a democratic society. This requires that the moral taste of the general public is taken into consideration.

During the last decades several survey studies have been performed on value-priorities in modern western nations. The best know of these is the World Value Study (reported a.o. Halman 1991). These studies show top ranking for happiness, typically above other endgoals of social policy such as raising the material standard of living and achieving greater social equality. This finding pleas for the inclusion of happiness in evaluation studies.

3.2 Consequences of happiness

Though desirable in itself, happiness can still disqualify as a policy goal and hence as an evaluation criterion. That can be the case if it involves undesirable side effects that neutralize its value. Some critics claim this is the case indeed.

Claimed negative effects of happiness

Negative consequences of happiness have been stressed by anti-hedonistic moral philosophers. The arguments often mix up happiness with pleasure seeking.

One of the harmful effects mentioned is that happiness would turn people into *contented cows*. Enjoyment of life, it is said, leads to idleness, discontent no longer stimulating the search for a better life. As a result creativity falters and art and sciences dry up.

In this vein it is also predicted that happiness will destroy itself in the long run, because it weakens us. Smug contentment would numb our outlook on the world and induce a *glassy and rosy view*, which ignores disturbing signs of suffering and danger. Happy citizens would therefore be inclined to fall prey to political manipulation. Happiness-addicted people would be particularly dependent on the technocrats of hedonism in the service of the Utilitarian welfare state. Happiness would sooth the political protest and nourishes political conservatism.

Another negative effect, it is claimed, is that happiness *weakens social bonds*. Contentment is seen to lead into selfish individualism, because it results in self-conceit. Thus happiness would create a society of isolated egoists.

These views are presented literally in Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World'. They imply that a happy life does not bring out the best in us. Happy people make for an ugly society; in this view mild unhappiness would be preferable.

Claimed positive effects of happiness

On the other hand present day psychologists stress the desirable effects of enjoying life. Different schools depict different benefits.

Humanistic psychologists were the first to stress positive effects of enjoyment. Echoing early Greek eudaemonism, Maslow (1968) suggests that, together with 'joy' and 'peak-experiences', happiness accompanies growth towards 'self-actualization'. In this view happiness is both a result and an *accelerator of growth*. Contrary to the above mentioned negative views Maslow does not regard frustration as an indispensable impetus for action. He is rather skeptical of what he calls 'deficiency motivation' and expects humans to perform at their best when propelled by 'growth motivation': i.e. 'pulled' by pleasure instead of being 'pushed' by pain. In opposition to anti-hedonist arguments, humanist psychologists associate happiness with zest and believe that it *stimulates activity* and *sharpen awareness*. With effort and attention no longer fixed on frustrations, human potential can be used to its full extent. Consequently it is thought that happiness fosters creativity rather than kills it.

In this view happiness *facilitates social contacts*, enjoyment freeing the way to authentic encounters, while unhappiness leads to preoccupation with self. The happy, growing individual is able to become involved in other people, rather than using them for filling in the blanks. He is also more sensitive to other people's needs and emotions. These capacities are crucial in contacts with children: young children in particular. A poor relationship with parents can harm severely the mental health of children. Fromm claims that "...a mother must not only be a 'good mother', but also a 'happy person'".

A theme in current cognitive psychology is that positive self-attitudes whorl as a *buffer to stress*. With a positive view of the world, stressful life-events are perceived as challenges rather than as threats. Bad luck hurts less because one can draw on some emotional reserve. Protective effects of this kind are currently attributed to a high esteem of one's 'competence'in

dealing with problems of life and to perceived 'social support'. Incidentally they are associated with a positive appreciation of life-as-a-whole, or with mood level. The more one enjoys life, the better one can take the knocks.

The latter view links up with the assumption of psychosomatic theory that chronic frustration tends to increase *vulnerability to disease*. An implication of this view is that discontent with one's life-as-a-whole is likely to affect negatively and that a positive appreciation of life will preserve good health.

Finally, an emerging view in the realm in clinical psychology is that the inability to enjoy life (anhedonia) plays a role in the onset of psychopathology. Chronic dissatisfaction is believed to hinder *effective coping* in several ways: among other things by blocking reinforcements necessary for learning and activation. The pattern of 'learned helplessness' would be one of the results.

Taken together these ideas suggests that humans function best when they take pleasure in life. Hence happy people make for a sane society.

Claims tested.

Elsewhere I have checked these claims on the available data. (Veenhoven 1988, 1989). I found no evidence of harmful effects of happiness. Happiness appeared not to numb, to slow down activity, or to lead people into selfish isolation. Rather enjoyment of life appeared to broaden perception, to encourage active involvement and to foster political participation. Happiness was found to facilitate social contacts: in particular contacts with intimates. It buffers stress slightly, thereby preserving health and lengthening life somewhat.

The positive effects are quite modest however and in some cases not beyond doubt. Yet the data clearly contradict the claim that happiness is harmful. Thus the argument based on that claim does not apply.

4. THE OBJECTION THAT HAPPINESS IS INSENSITIVE TO REAL IMPROVEMENT

Remember the reasons why happiness is seen to fail in reflecting real improvements: one reason is that happiness would be 'relative', the other that it is a fixed 'trait'. These objections are based on different assumptions about the psychology of happiness, but lead to the same conclusion as to its utility in evaluation-research.

4.1 Is happiness relative?

The theory that happiness is relative is based on three postulates: 1.) Happiness results from comparison 2.) Standards of comparison adjust 3.) Standards of comparison are arbitrary mental constructs. On the basis of these postulates the theory predicts that happiness does not depend on the real quality-of-life. Changes in living conditions to the good or the bad are seen to have at best a short-lived effect on happiness. It is further claimed that people are typically neutral about their life, and that earlier hardship favors later happiness. Several investigations claim support for these inferences. Happiness is reported to be as high in poor countries as in rich countries (Easterly 1972) and to be no lower among paralyzed accident victims than it is among lottery winners (Brickman 1971, 1978).

Elsewhere I have reviewed this literature in detail and considered the evidence. (Veenhoven 1991) All the predictions were falsified. It appeared that a) people tend to be unhappy under adverse conditions such as poverty, war and isolation, b) improvement or

deterioration of at least some conditions does effect happiness lastingly, c) earlier hardship does not favor later happiness, d) people are typically positive about their life rather than neutral.

The theory happiness-is-relative mixes up 'overall happiness' with 'contentment'. Contentment is indeed largely a matter of comparing life-as-it-is to standards of how-life-should-be. Yet overall happiness does not entirely depend on comparison. The overall evaluation of life depends also on how one feels affectively and 'hedonic level of affect' draws on its turn on the gratification of basic bio-psychological needs. Contrary to acquired 'standards' of comparison these innate 'needs' do not adjust to any and all conditions: they mark in fact the limits of human adaptability. To the extent that it depends on need-gratification, happiness is not relative.

4.2 **Is happiness a trait?**

The notion that happiness is essentially unalterable figures in psychological thinking as well as in sociological thought. Psychologists who adhere this view think of happiness or unhappiness as a 'personal trait'. Sociologists in this tradition see happiness as a matter of 'cultural character'.

Personal trait

The idea of a 'happy personality' has several variations. One is that people tend to be born as either happy or unhappy. In this view happiness is a temperamental disposition, possibly based in the neurophysiological structure of pleasure-centers in the brain. See a.o. Tellegen (1988). Another variation is that happiness is an acquired disposition. In this context happiness can be seen either as the product of various dispositions or as a disposition in itself.

The former view sees happiness as the result of f.e. an optimistic view and high self-esteem. In the latter line view happiness is be conceived as an established attitude towards life. In that line Lieberman (1970:74) wrote: "...at some point in life, before even the age of 18, an individual becomes geared to a certain stable level of satisfaction, which - within a rather broad range of environmental circumstances - he maintains throughout life".

Whatever the variant, the idea of happiness as a personal trait implies that people tend to remain as happy or unhappy as they are, and that improvement or deterioration of their living conditions does not make them more or less happy. An explicit account of this implication can be found with Costa et al (1987:305), who write: "...happiness is ultimately also independent of health, youth, power and other life circumstances...".

Again the claims were confronted by the available data (Veenhoven 1990). A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies showed that happiness is reasonably stable on the short term, but not in the long run. Over the life-time happiness appears to be quite variable, both absolutely and relatively. Longitudinal studies also show that serious lifechange to the better or worse does affect happiness accordingly. Social and psychological resources moderate these effects but do not neutralize them.

Cultural Character

The idea that there are happy and unhappy cultures is part of common sense knowledge. For example: the Italian way of life is seen as easygoing and lightheaded, whereas the Swedes are attributed a gloomy outlook. The idea figures in social science as well. Inkeles (1990:15) for instance attributes the difference in happiness between countries to "national creed". "Given the tendency to report oneself as happy or unhappy seems to be relatively stable characteristic of given national populations, in short a statistically reliable measure of the feeling state of the nation, would seem to justify describing it as truly a national character trait. Similarly Inglehart (1991) attributes differences in average happiness between nations to 'cynical attitudes' that may have developed out of frustrations in the past and have been transmitted through socialisation.

I checked these ideas in an analysis of the (sizable) differences in average happiness between nations. These differences could not be explained by views on happiness (familiarity with the concept, moral appreciation of it) nor by variation in attitudinal cynism. However the differences did fit the alternative explanation in terms of societal quality. Average happiness appeared to be consistently higher in countries that provide better living conditions (material comfort, social equality, social security and asses to knowledge). Together these country characteristics explain more than half the variance in average happiness! Improvement or deteriorations in living conditions is (sometimes) followed by a derange in average happiness. (Veenhoven 1992)

Together these findings knock the bottom out of the objection that happiness cannot monitor progress. Happiness certainly is a rather slowly reacting indicator and insensitive to minor changes, but it does reflect serious amelioration or deterioration of life.

5. THE OBJECTION THAT HAPPINESS CANNOT BE MEASURED

The third objection mentioned was that happiness is too elusive a matter to be measured. Real happiness yields of social policy would therefore fail to appear in evaluation research.

5.1 Validity of responses to survey questions

When happiness polls began to be used during the last few decades, the discussion focused on whether subjective appreciation of life can be assessed validly. The following issues figured in that discussion: 1) Can happiness be measured 'objectively' or only 'subjectively' by questioning? 2) If questioning is the only way, do interviews tap an existing state of mind or do they merely invite a guess? 3) If people do indeed have an idea about their enjoyment of life, do their responses to questions reflect that idea adequately? These questions have instigated a great deal of empirical research and can now be fairly well answered. (Research reviewed in Veenhoven 1984, chapter 2).

'Measurement' was long understood as 'objective', 'external' assessment, analogous to the measurement of blood-pressure by a doctor. It is now clear that life satisfaction cannot be measured that way. Steady physiological concomitants have not been discovered and it is doubted that they ever will be. Neither have any behaviours been found to be linked reliably to inner enjoyment of life. Like all attitudes, happiness is reflected only partly in overt behaviour. Though an 'active', 'outgoing' and 'friendly' appearance is more frequent among the happy, it is observed among unhappy persons as well. Even unconscious body language has been found to be only weakly related to the inner appreciation of life. Consequently, ratings of someone's happiness by his peers or teachers are only weakly related to self-reports. The case of suicide was long considered to be an exception. This kind of behaviour was thought to indicate extreme unhappiness. However, the abundant research in that field has made it clear that dissatisfaction with life is at best one of the motives and that there is a great cultural and personal variation in one's capacity to cope with unhappiness.

Inference from overt behaviour being impossible, we must make do with questioning: either direct or indirect and in a personal interview or by an anonymous questionnaire. Great doubts have been expressed about the validity of such self-reports of happiness. However, empirical checks of these suspicions have not revealed great distortions. (Research reviewed in Veenhoven 1984, chapter 3).

One of these doubts raised is that most people would have no opinion at all about their life satisfaction. Answers to questions on that subject would reflect other things: in particular

prevailing norms of self-presentation. However, people appear quite aware of their enjoyment of life. Eight out of ten Americans think of it once a week or often. Consequently, responses on happiness items tend to be prompt, non-responses is not the rule.

It is often claimed that people present themselves happier than -deep in their hart- they know they are. Both ego-defensive and social desirability effects would be involved. This distortion should give itself away in the often observed overrepresentation of 'very happy' people, in the fact that most people perceived themselves as happier than average and in the finding that psychosomatic complaints are not uncommon among persons who characterize themselves as being happy. Yet these facts provide no proof. There are good reasons why most people could honestly imagine themselves happier than average, and reasons why the presence of psychosomatic complaints does not exclude a positive appreciation of life. The proof of the pudding is a demonstration of distortion itself. Several clinical studies have tried to do so, but failed to find evidence for a general overstatement of happiness.

Although there is no proof of systematic desirability distortion, there is evidence that response to questions on happiness are liable to various situational influences, such as the site of the interview, the interviewer, the weather, one's mood, etc. These differences can be considered as essentially random error. More systematic measurement error is involved as well. Responses are influenced by the precise wording of questions, answer formats, sequence of questions and context of the interview.

5.2 Comparability across nations

Some policy evaluations have involved comparison of happiness between nations. As noted above there are clear differences in average happiness between countries that correspond with success in the achievement of a high material standard of living, political democracy and social equality. These results are received with much reserve, because the differences in happiness could be largely due to 'cultural bias' in its measurement.

This objection involves at least four different claims. The first is that *translation* plays us false: words like 'happiness' and 'satisfaction' have subtle different connotations in the various languages and would therefore measure different matters. A second claim is that responses are systematically distorted by *desirability* bias: in countries where happiness ranks high as a value, people would be more inclined to overstate their appreciation of life. A third claim is that *response styles* distort the picture, in particular the tendency to present one self as an average citizen that prevails in collectivistic cultures. This would lead to lower scores. The fourth claim is that happiness is a typical *western concept*. Unfamiliarity with it in non-western cultures would result in lower ratings on questions that use the concept.

These four claims were tested on the data of various cross-national studies (Ouweneel & Veenhoven 1991). None of them was supported. Though these first few tests do not settle the issue definitively, they should at least allow the happiness criterion the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

6. CONCLUSION

Happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction is a useful criterion in the evaluation of social policies that aim at a better quality-of-life. Happiness is a highly valued goal in present day society. Contrary to anti-hedonistic claims it involves no undesirable side-effects in the long run. Happiness is also sufficiently sensitive for amelioration or deterioration of life. Contrary to skeptic theories happiness is neither a relative matter nor an essentially trait like phenomenon. Like other attitudinal phenomena happiness can be reasonably measured.

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NOTES

- i. The common distinction in the literature is between 'objective' and 'subjective quality' of life refers to the possibility of measurement by an outsider. What I call 'living conditions' can be measured objectively, but not all these things I regard as constituting a 'good life' is subjective. For instance health is not.
- ii. Most quality-of-life scores used at the individual level combine indicators of both 'living-conditions' and 'good living'. For instance the well-being index used by the Social and Cultural Planbureau in the Netherlands covers the following aspects: 1) housing, 2) health, 3) consumptive potential, 4) education and 5) social activity.