

HAPPINESS IN SOCIETY

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Summary

A good society is first of all a livable society and the livability of a society manifests in the happiness of its members. Therefore a sociology of the good society requires an understanding of happiness, in particular answers to the following questions: 1) What is happiness precisely? 2) Can happiness be measured? 3) How happy are people presently? 4) What causes us to be happy or unhappy? 5) Can happiness be raised lastingly? Through the ages philosophers have toiled with these questions. Since the 1960's they are subject of empirical research. This paper takes stock of the progress.

INTRODUCTION

This session is entitled 'The happiness of society'. Yet I will speak about happiness *in* society. Below I will define happiness as an individual state of mind. That definition does not apply to social systems. Citizens can be happy or unhappy but not societies.

The overarching theme of this conference is 'The good society'. One of the qualities that denotes a good society is its 'livability' and the livability of a society manifests ultimately in the degree to which its members live long and happily (Veenhoven 1996). This criterion links up with 'utilitarian' moral philosophy, which holds that social systems should be judged by their effect on "the greatest happiness for the greatest number".

Contemporary study of happiness

The study of happiness has long been a playground for philosophical speculation. By lack of empirical measures of happiness, it was not possible to check propositions about the matter. Hence, understanding of happiness remained speculative and uncertain. During the last decades, survey-research methods introduced by the social sciences have brought a break-through. Dependable measures of happiness have developed, by means of which a significant body of knowledge has evolved. This paper presents an account of this new field

Development of the field

Efforts to create a better society started with attacking the most blatant evils: ignorance, illness and poverty. Consequently, progress was measured by such things as literacy, control of epidemic disease and elimination of hunger. Social statistics were developed for the registration of the progress achievements.

Advances in the combat of these plagues were followed by efforts to ensure a reasonable material standard of living for everybody. Progress on this matter was mostly measured by gains in money-income, income-security and income equality. This gave rise to an abundance of social research on poverty and social-inequality, which is still a major research tradition nowadays.

In the 1960's, a new theme came on the research-agenda. At that time, most western nations had developed into affluent welfare states. Limits to economic growth were recognized and post-materialistic values gained field. This called for broader conceptions and measures of the good life. Consequently, new terms were introduced, such as 'quality-of-life' and 'wellbeing', and older terms such as 'happiness' revived. Initially these notions were polemic, and served to denote that there is more than just material welfare. Yet soon, they developed into more substantive concepts and became subject of empirical investigation.

Questions on happiness

The literature on happiness can be framed within some key-questions. These questions can be ordered as steps in the process for creating greater happiness for a greater number. 1) What is happiness precisely? 2) Can happiness be measured? 3) How happy are people presently? 4) What causes us to be happy or unhappy? 5) Can happiness be raised lastingly?

Below I will provide a definition of happiness, and thereby answer question 1. On that basis, I will take stock of the answers to the other questions and explore their implications.

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§ 1 CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

In this paper happiness is defined as the *subjective enjoyment of life*. To distinguish that meaning from other denotations of the word, I will first delineate the concept from other qualities of life' (§ 1.1) and next specify what kind of subjective enjoyment is meant (§ 1.2). On that basis, I will provide a definition (§ 1.3).

§ 1.1 Happiness and other qualities of life

Any statement about quality of life involves a judgement. In order to sort the various qualities involved, we must establish *what life* is evaluated, by *what standards*.

Quality of what 'life'?

The object of evaluation is mostly an individual life, the quality of life of a person. Yet, the term is also used for aggregates, for instance when we speak about the quality-of-life of women. In that case, the term refers usually to the average of individuals. Sometimes the term is used in reference to humanity as a whole. In this context, the object of evaluation is mostly the average individual, and the long-term destiny of the species. The evaluation then concerns 'human life', rather than 'human lives'.

The terms 'wellbeing' and 'happiness' are also used in reference to social systems. When speaking about the 'happiness of society' (title of this symposium) we often aim at the collective level, how well society functions and maintains itself. Propagandists also exploit this ambiguity, in this case as a means to disguise differences in interest between individuals and society.

In this paper, I focus on the quality of *individual human lives*. As we will see, that is difficult enough. The conceptual distinctions presented below are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven 2000).

What 'quality' of life?

A classic distinction is between 'objective' and 'subjective' quality of life. The first refers to the degree that a life meets explicit standards of the good life, as assessed by an impartial outsider. For instance the result of a medical examination. The latter variant concerns self-appraisals based on implicit criteria, for example, someone's subjective feeling of health. These qualities do not necessarily correspond; someone may be in good health by the criteria of his doctor, but feel bad. Based on this distinction, Zapf (1984: 25) has proposed a fourfold classification of 'welfare' concepts. When conditions of life score good on objective measures and subjective appreciation of life is positive, he speaks of 'well-being'; when both evaluations are negative, he speaks of 'deprivation'. When objective quality is good, but subjective appreciation is negative, the term 'dissonance' is applied, and the combination of bad conditions and positive appreciation is labeled 'adaptation'.

Though elegant, these distinctions have not proven particularly useful. The taxonomy does not explain much. The main reason is that the difference is more in observation than in substance. Objective health-assessment aims at the same qualities as subjective appraisals, though by different means. Further, the labeling gives rise to misunderstanding. The word 'objective' suggest indisputable truth, whereas the term 'subjective' is easily interpreted as a matter of arbitrary taste. This suggestion is false, the fact that income can be measured objectively does not mean that its value is beyond question.

Chances and outcomes

A substantively more relevant distinction is between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. This is the difference between potentiality and actuality. I refer to this as 'life-chances'ⁱⁱⁱ and 'life-results'. Opportunities and outcomes are related, but are certainly not the same. Chances can fail to be realized, due to stupidity or bad luck. Conversely, people sometimes make much of their life in spite of poor opportunities.

This distinction is quite common in the field of public-health research. Pre-conditions for good health, such as adequate nutrition and professional care are seldom mixed up with health itself. Much research is aimed at assessing the relationships between these phenomena; for instance by checking whether common nutritional advice really yields extra years lived in good health. Yet, in social policy discussions means and ends are less well distinguished.

Outer and inner qualities

A second difference is between 'external' and 'internal' qualities. In the first case the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Lane (1994) made this distinction clear by telling 'quality of society' from 'quality of persons'.

This distinction is also quite common in public health. External pathogens are distinguished from inner afflictions, and researchers try to identify the mechanisms by which the former produce the latter, and the conditions in which this is more and less likely. Yet again, this basic insight is lacking in many social policy discussions.

Four qualities of life

The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in **exhibit 1**. The distinction between chances and results is presented vertically, the difference between outer and inner qualities horizontally.

In the upper half of the scheme, we see two variants of potential quality of life, with next to the outer opportunities in one's environment, the inner capacities to exploit these. The environmental chances can be denoted by the term *livability*, the personal capacities with the word *life-ability*. This difference is not new. In sociology, the distinction between 'social capital' and 'psychological capital' is sometimes used in this context. In the psychology of stress, the difference is labeled negatively in terms of 'burden' and 'bearing power'.

The lower half of the scheme is about the quality of life with respect to its outcomes. These outcomes can be judged by their value for one's environment and value for oneself. The external worth of a life is denoted by the term 'utility of life'. The inner valuation of it is called 'appreciation of life'. These matters are of course related. Knowing that one's life is useful will typically add to the appreciation of it. Yet not all-useful lives are happy lives and not every good-for-nothing really cares. This difference has been elaborated in discussions on utilitarian moral philosophy, which praises happiness as the highest good. Adversaries of that view hold that there is more worth to life than just pleasures and pains. Mill (1861) summarized that position in his famous statement that he preferred an unhappy Socrates to a happy fool.

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