

SOCIOLOGY'S BLIND EYE FOR HAPPINESS ¹

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on happiness have found that: a) most people are happy in modern nations, b) average happiness in nations is rising, c) inequality in happiness is going down, d) happiness depends heavily on the kind of society one lives in, but e) not very much on one's place in society. These remarkable findings are largely ignored in sociology, if not denied. This has several reasons. One reason is professional bias: most sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems are therefore not apt to see that people flourish. Another reason is ideological: many sociologists are 'critical' of modern society and can therefore hardly imagine that people thrive in these conditions. Lastly, some sociological theories play them false, in particular cognitive theories implying that happiness is relative. These theories and the evidence against them are discussed in this paper.

1 FINDINGS ON HAPPINESS

Happiness has long been a playground for speculative philosophy, but since the 1970s it has also become the subject of empirical research. In that research, happiness is conceived as overall life-satisfaction and measured using self-reports. This conception of happiness has appeared to be sound and this way of measurement has been proven valid (Veenhoven, 1984, Diener 1999). This research tradition has yielded a growing body of knowledge, much of which is gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2007). There are four main findings:

Most people are happy

The earliest investigations on happiness took place in modern western nations and observed that most people were happy. This appeared not only in responses to questions about life satisfaction, but also in various measures of daily mood, such as the Bradburn (1969) Affect Balance Scale. An example is presented in [figure 1](#), in which the distribution of responses to the following question in the World Values Survey 1999 in the EU member states is shown.

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All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as-a-whole these days?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Dissatisfied satisfied

Only 17% of the population in these countries rated 5 or lower on this question while no less than 54% rated their life 8 or higher. The reports may be somewhat inflated by desirability, but this bias appears to be marginal. The validity of these measures is beyond doubt. People understand the concept and typically answer such questions properly. Responses are not so positive in all countries of the world, but still the average is above neutral in most of day's nations. This can be seen in [figure 2](#), in which the distribution of average scores in nations is presented. Of the 95 nations in this comparison, only 19 score 5 or lower, while average happiness is 7 or higher in 25 nations

Average happiness is rising

Since the 1970s happiness has been periodically assessed in most western nations. Comparison over time shows an upward trend in most of these nations. See [figure 3](#). Trend data on non-western nations are less abundant, but show greater gains in happiness over this period (Veenhoven, 2006, table 2). Life-expectancy has also risen considerably in this era and this means that this generation has witnessed an unprecedented rise in 'happy life years'. Americans gained 5,2 happy life-years between 1973 and 2003 and Western Europeans about 7 happy life years. We live now longer and happier than ever before in human history (Veenhoven 2005).

Inequality in happiness going down

This rise in average happiness has been accompanied by a reduction of the dispersion of happiness in the general public, which manifests in a lowering of standard deviations over time. This reduction is partly due to the rising average that causes a concentration of responses at the top of the scale, but not entirely. The lowering of inequality in happiness is also due to a reduction in unhappy responses. (See [figure 4](#))

Strong impact of *kind of society*

Average happiness differs widely across nations (cf. [Figure 2](#)) and there appears to be a system in these differences. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that combine a good material standard of living with good governance, freedom and a climate of tolerance. See [figure 5](#). Together, such societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in average happiness across nations (Ott 2005)

There are also societal characteristics that appeared to be unrelated to average happiness of citizens. This is the case for income inequality in nations (Berg 2006) and for state welfare effort (Veenhoven 2000).

Little impact of *place in society*

Several surveys on happiness have been done in the context of marketing research for the welfare state and aimed at identifying client groups. Investigators expected social deprivation to be accompanied by unhappiness, which would legitimize policy intervention. Yet they found little correlation between happiness and income position, happiness also appeared to be unrelated to the level of education of an individual. Together, social positional variables explain at best 10% of the differences in happiness found within nations. Happiness depends far more on embedding in intimate networks and on psychological characteristics (e.g. Headey & Wearing 1992). This is at least so in modern affluent nations.

2 RECEPTION IN SOCIOLOGY

There are good reasons to expect that these findings will attract considerable attention in sociology. One reason is that the subject was on the agenda of the 19th century founding fathers of sociology such as Auguste Comte (Ple 2000) and Herbert Spencer (1857).

Another reason to expect arid interest is that these findings involve answers to long-standing questions in sociology, the finding that most people are happy is indicative of how livable modern society is; the finding that happiness is rising embodies an answer to the question of progress; the finding that inequality in happiness is going down is telling about the relevance of 'new' social inequalities and the finding that happiness differs so much across kinds of societies is highly relevant in the debate of what a good society is like.

Still another reason to expect close attention is that some of the findings flatly contradict some common beliefs. The finding that inequality of happiness has diminished during the last decades contradicts the common notion of 'new inequality' arising in modern societies. Likewise the finding that income inequality in nations is unrelated to average happiness contradicts the commonly held belief that socio-economic disparities cause deep frustration. The same holds for the finding that income position within nations hardly affects happiness.

Yet the reality is that these findings are not acknowledged in sociology. This appears in the following examples:

Not mentioned in textbooks

The subject of happiness is typically absent in sociological textbooks. For instance the word does not appear in the subject index of the introductory books by written by Giddens (2006), Marsh et al (1996) and Newman (1997). These books do mention negative mental states such as anomie and alienation and do contain sections on (ill) health. A notable exception is the introduction to macro-sociology by Nolan and Lensky (2006) where happiness is discussed in the context of social progress.

Missing in Dictionary of Sociology

The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, 2nd edition, does not include happiness as a keyword, and neither subjective well-being nor quality-of-life (Johnson 2002)

Marginal in sociological journals

The subject of happiness is only rarely addressed in sociological journals. This appears from an analysis of the sociological abstracts. Until the year 2000 the subject was hardly mentioned at all and today the number of publications on this subject is still below 2% of the total. See [figure 6](#). The bulk of these publications can be found in two niche journals: Social Indicators Research and the Journal of Happiness Studies. Happiness is still hardly mentioned in mainstream sociological journals. The subject gets more attention in psychology and recently also in economics.

Missing in sociological discourse on 'quality of life'

Still, the term 'quality-of-life' is not unknown in sociology. There are symposia under that name and also research institutes. Yet subjective enjoyment of life is typically not at stake in these contexts, quality-of-life being typically conceived as the degree to which life meets a-priory standards of wellbeing. The last (16th) world congress of sociology provides a nice illustration: the conference theme was: 'The quality of social existence in a globalizing world' and the issues discussed in this context were conditions deemed beneficial, such as social identity, social cohesion and social mobility. Subjective appreciation of life in these conditions was markedly absent from the thematic sessions of this conference.

Lost in a preoccupation with misery

As noted above, sociology deals with problems in the first place. This appears for instance in the use of the word 'satisfaction' in sociological abstracts; in 41% of the abstracts that word is used to denote a negative state, that is, *dissatisfaction*, while in only 8% the word is used for a positive appreciation².

Analysis of the sociological abstracts has also shown an *increasing* use of negative words such as 'fear' and 'crime' over the last decade (Elchardus 2005). This narrowing of the focus on misery contrasts with the above mentioned findings of rising levels of happiness in nations.

3 REASONS FOR NEGLECT

Why do sociologists overlook this matter? I see three kinds of reasons: pragmatic, ideological and theoretical.

To begin with pragmatic reasons: sociologists are more interested in what people do than in how they feel. Their main objective is to explain social behavior and happiness is at best a variable in that context. A related point is that sociology is about collectivities, while happiness is an individual level concept. A further pragmatic reason is that sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems. So, if they look at subjective well being at all, they focus on ill being in the first place³.

Next there are ideological reasons. Many sociologists are committed to notions of objective wellbeing, such as social equality and social cohesion. They are therefore not eager to investigate how people actually feel in such conditions, and when they do, they often ignore contradictory results. For instance, when people appear to feel subjectively good in conditions deemed to be objectively bad, this is easily disposed of as 'desirability bias' or 'false consciousness'.

Lastly, there are theoretical reasons. Sociologists tend to think of happiness as a mere idea that depends on social comparison with variable standards and that is, therefore, a whimsical state of mind, not worth pursuing and hence not worth studying. Below I will consider these views in more detail.

Sociologists are not specialized in matters of the mind, but still make psychological assumptions. They typically borrow from cognitive psychology, probably because that line of thought fits with their view on man as a socially determined being. In this line, sociologists see happiness as a cognitive 'construct' shaped by collective notions of the good life and as the result of comparisons, social comparison in particular.

Presumed social construction of happiness

Social construction theory is about how we make sense of things. It assumes that we 'construct' mental representations, using collective notions as building blocks. Social constructionism stresses human thinking and is blind for affective experience and innate drives.

In this view, happiness is regarded as a social construction, comparable to notions like 'beauty' and 'fairness'. A common reasoning in this line is that happiness depends on shared notions about life and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals.

One of the ways this is assumed to work is seeing the glass half full or half empty, optimistic cultures tending to highlight the positive aspects of life, while pessimistic cultures emphasize its shortcomings. Americans have been mentioned as an example of the former view and the French of the latter, e.g. by Ostroot & Scheider (1985). In this line Inglehart (1990:30) has suggested that happiness is lower in France than in the US because life was harder in France for earlier generations, and this is echoed in a more pessimistic outlook on life today.

Another cognitive mechanism assumed to gear happiness is comparison with shared notions of the good life. In this view, happiness is the gap between perceptions of life-as-it -is with notions of how-life-should-be. In this line it is commonly argued that the advertising industry reduces our wellbeing, because it fosters dreams of a life that is

out of reach for the common man (Layard 2005). Another example of this view is the claim that the high levels of happiness in modern nations result from giving up hope for a better life.

An additional mechanism that has been mentioned is that we see ourselves typically through the eyes of others and hence also judge our happiness through their eyes. In this view, happiness is a 'reflected appraisal'. We will be positive about our life when people around us deem us to be well off and negative when others see us as losers. In this vein the lower happiness among singles has been explained as the result of a negative stereotype: because singles are 'labeled' as pitiful they come to see themselves as miserable, in spite of the apparent advantages of single living (e.g. Davies & Strong 1977).

The constructionist view implies that there is little value to happiness, happiness being a mere idea. Since notions about the good life vary across time and culture, happiness is also seen to be culturally relative. A life that is deemed perfect in one idea of the good life may be seen to be a failure from perspective. For this reason this theory is popular among the critics of Bentham's (1789) moral philosophy, i.e. that we should aim at "greater happiness for a greater number"; it reduces happiness to something insignificant.

Theoretical plausibility

It is beyond doubt that shared notions frame much of our appraisals, yet this is not to say that all awareness is socially constructed. We need no shared notions to experience pain or hunger; culture at best modifies our reflection on these experiences somewhat. Our understanding draws also on external stimuli and on inner signals. The question thus is: How does this work in the case of happiness?

When striking the balance of their life, people appear to use their mood as the prime source of information (Schwartz & Strack 1991) and consequently overall happiness correlates typically stronger with hedonic level of affect than with contentment. This appears from an analysis of correlational findings in the World Database of Happiness (WDH 2007, section H 6). There is logic in this, since the affect system is evolutionary older and serves to ascertain that an organism's basic needs are met. The cognitive system developed on top of this in *homo sapiens*, but it has not replaced the affective system. It is rather an additional device that allows better learning from experience and planning of activities. In this light it is unlikely that happiness is merely due to cognitive appraisal.

Empirical support

The reality value of this view cannot be tested as such, because the human mind is still a black box. Yet we can check its aptness indirectly, when we consider the implications of the theory that happiness is a mere social construction.

Culture specific?

One implication is that conditions for happiness will be variable across cultures. If happiness is a culture specific construct, its determinants will also be culturally specific. Hence empirical studies on correlates of happiness must show considerable cultural variation and hardly any universal pattern. Yet the available data show otherwise. Comparison of average happiness across nations reveals a common pattern. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that provide a decent material standard of living, that are politically democratic and well governed and where the cultural climate is characterized by trust and tolerance. Together objective societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in happiness across nations (Veenhoven & Kalmijn 2005). Comparison of correlations within nations also shows much similarity. In all countries, the married appear to be happier than singles (Diener, 2000) and health is also a strong correlate of happiness all over the world, both physical health and mental health. See correlational findings on Physical health (section P 6) and Mental health (section M 7) in WDH 2007. Likewise, the differences in happiness across age and gender are typically small everywhere. See correlational findings on happiness and Age (section A 4) and Gender (section G 1) in WDH 2007.

Variable over time?

A second implication is that happiness must be variable over time. If happiness depends on shared notions of the good life, it will vary with fads about that matter and this must be reflected in erratic movements in average happiness in nations, comparable to changes in political preferences and tastes for music. Yet again this not what the data show. Average happiness appears to be very stable over time, at least in western nations over the last 30 years, where happiness has risen slightly without many fluctuations (Veenhoven 2006c). Follow-up studies at the individual level also show considerable constancy over time (Erhardt et. al. 2000).

Inconsequential?

A third implication is that happiness is of little consequence. If happiness is sheer cognitive spin, based on fashionable ideas, it will not matter much whether it pans out positively or negatively. Happiness is then a petty appraisal, such as a person's preference for one kind of wallpaper or another; nice in itself but of no consequence for anything more than that.

Once more, this appears not to be the case. Happiness appears to go hand in hand with objective thriving and follow-up studies have shown that happiness is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity (e.g. Danner et. al 2000, Veenhoven 2007b)

Together, these findings do not support the theory that happiness is a mere making of the mind.

Note that these findings concern happiness-as-such, and not opinions about what adds to happiness. Happiness-as-such is something that we experience ourselves and which we can appraise without the help of others. Though we know *how* we feel, we often do not know *why* and in attributing grounds for our wellbeing we draw more on a shared view. In this respect happiness is comparable to a headache: a headache-as-such is not a social construction, it is an autonomous signal from the body. Yet our interpretations of what gives us a headache depend very much on hearsay.

Wellbeing as surpassing the Jones

All sociologists learn in their student days about the exemplary case of 'relative deprivation' described in Stouffer's (1949) classic study 'The American Soldier'. One of the things assessed in this study is the satisfaction with promotion chances and contrary to expectation the satisfaction with this aspect of army life appeared to be higher in units where promotion chances were low, such as the military police, than in units where promotion chances were high, such as the air force. This phenomenon was explained in terms of social comparison; because promotion was more common in the air force, air force personnel more often felt they were entitled to promotion. This case of satisfaction with promotion makes many sociologists think that all satisfaction depends on social comparison.

Social comparison theory is a variant of a wider comparison theory that links up with the above mentioned notion that happiness is the difference between life-as-it-is and how-life-should-be. The smaller these discrepancies are, the higher the happiness is assumed to be. In this theory there can be multiple discrepancies; among other things discrepancies between what one has and what one thinks that one could have, and discrepancies between what one has and what one feels entitled to (Michalos 1985). Perceptions of what one could have and what would be fair to have are seen to be drawn from social comparison. In this view, happiness is a matter of keeping up with the Jones's; we feel well if we do better and bad if we do worse than those we compare ourselves to.

In this theory there is little hope for achieving greater happiness for a greater number, since improving the living conditions for all will also improve the life of the Jones's, leaving the relative differences as before. Social comparison is one of the mechanisms in the idea that we are on a 'hedonic treadmill' that presumably nullifies all progress (Brickman & Campbell 1971) and it is the main mechanism in Easterlin's (1974) theory that economic growth does not add to happiness. In this view we can at best mitigate the effects of social comparison somewhat if we make the differences less visible. In this line Frank (1999) has advised that conspicuous consumption should be discouraged with heavy taxes on luxury goods and Layard (2005) recommends taxing high incomes more. Limiting advertisement is also suggested in this context, in particular commercials that use pictures of a life that is out of reach of the common man.

Theoretical plausibility

There are several problems with this psychological theory. First it is clear that social comparison does not apply to all subjective appraisals. When I hit my finger with a hammer, I feel pain and my finger does not hurt less if my neighbor Jones does the same thing. When appraising our situation, we use various sources of information, and social comparison is only one of these.

This brings us to the question of what value social comparison could be for assessing how well one lives. Obviously, that value is limited to aspects of life where social comparison is possible, such as your income, but not to less visible aspects such your sex life or the pleasure you take from watching a sunset. Even where we can measure up to the Jones this evidently informs us about what is *possible* in life, but not necessarily about what is *desirable* or *enjoyable*. Looking over the fence of my neighbor Jones I can see that I lag behind in the number of beer cans emptied, but this does not tell me whether I would be better off if I drank more. Advocates of social comparison theory would retort that we compare only on things that are socially valued in society, such as money and fame, and this links up with the assumption that notions of the good life are socially constructed. Yet even if beer boozing were highly valued in my society, and if I wholeheartedly supported that value, I would end up less well if I drank more than my dipsomaniacal neighbor Jones. That is evident because drinking too much is bad for the body, irrespective of how I think about this.

This example illustrates a major flaw in comparison theory: it forgets that we are biological organisms. Obviously we cannot feel well if our body is harmed. Affective alarms start to ring when we do not get enough food or when our temperature falls too low. Less obvious, but no less present are psychological needs, such as the need to belong and to use and develop our potentials. We feel lousy when lonely and bored when unchallenged. Humans are not born as tabula rasa, on which socialization imprints culture specific wants, we are pre-wired to need some things and as a result feel good when these needs are met.

In this respect we are very much like our fellow animals. Dogs and cats can also feel good or bad and evidently do not calculate their happiness by comparing shared standards of the good life. Evolution has simply programmed them to feel good or bad subjectively in situations that are good or bad for their survival objectively. Our affective system is not much different from that of dogs and cats, and also serves to make us do intuitively what is good for us. Human cognition has developed on top of this affective program and allows us to reflect on affective signals and even to ignore them to some extent. Yet this is not to say that cognition has replaced affective experience. Without affective information we are conatively blind as Damasio (1994) has showed in his studies of brain injuries. Hence without affective information we will also be unable to appraise the quality of our life.

I have discussed this alternative 'need theory'⁴ of happiness elsewhere (Veenhoven 1995, 2000) and Ed Diener has reviewed the strong and weak points of this

view (Diener et. al. 2000). Though alien to mainstream sociology, this latter view on happiness would fit socio-biology; however, to my knowledge this field of sociology has not yet considered the issue.

Fit with facts

Social comparison is at best one piece of information in appraisals of happiness and it is an empirical question how much it matters. We can see how much when considering some implications of the theory.

One testable implication of social comparison theory is that people will typically be neither positive nor negative about their life. If we feel good because we do better than the Jones, the Jones must feel bad because they do not so well. This must manifest in an average around neutral in general population samples. Yet survey data do not support this prediction, average happiness being far above neutral in modern nations.

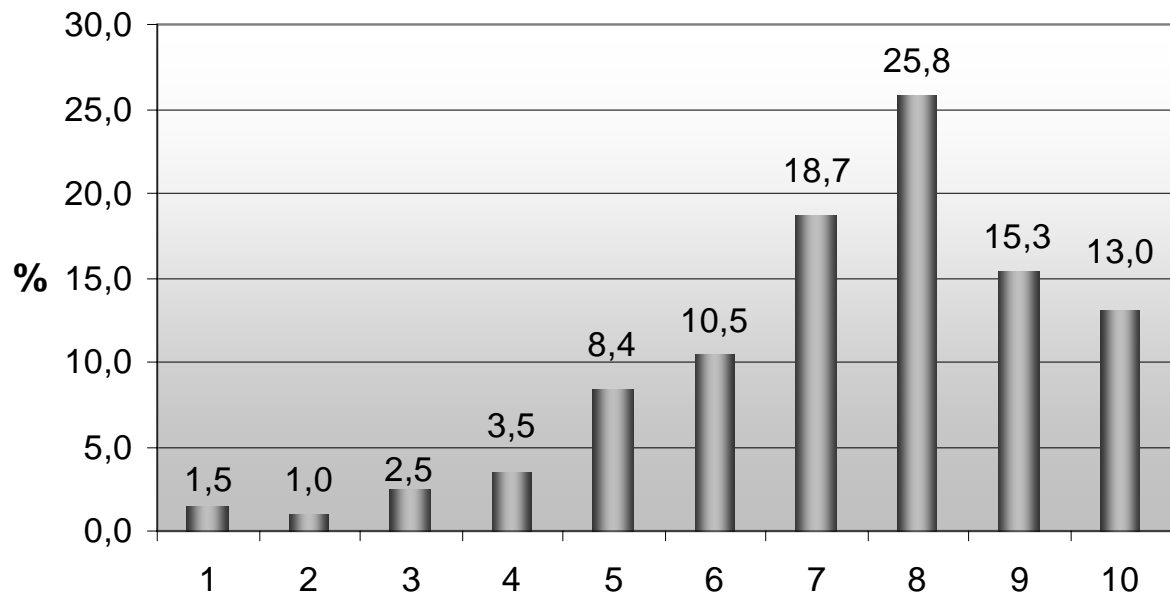
Another implication is that happiness must be higher among people who do well on socially valued standards. This is not always the case however. Though people in high status jobs are typically happier than people in low status occupations, there is no correlation between happiness and level of education. Likewise, there is only modest correlation between happiness and income and this correlation is at least partly due to an effect of the former on the latter, happiness adding to earning chances. See respectively correlational findings on happiness and Occupation (section O1) Education (section E 1) and Income (section I1) in WDH 2007.

However, happiness does appear to depend on things that have little to do with social comparison, such as participation in voluntary organizations, intimate ties and being an extraverted and conscientious person. See respectively findings on happiness and Social participation (section S7), Friendship (section F6), Marriage (section M2 and Personality (section P4) in WDH 2007.

4 CONCLUSION

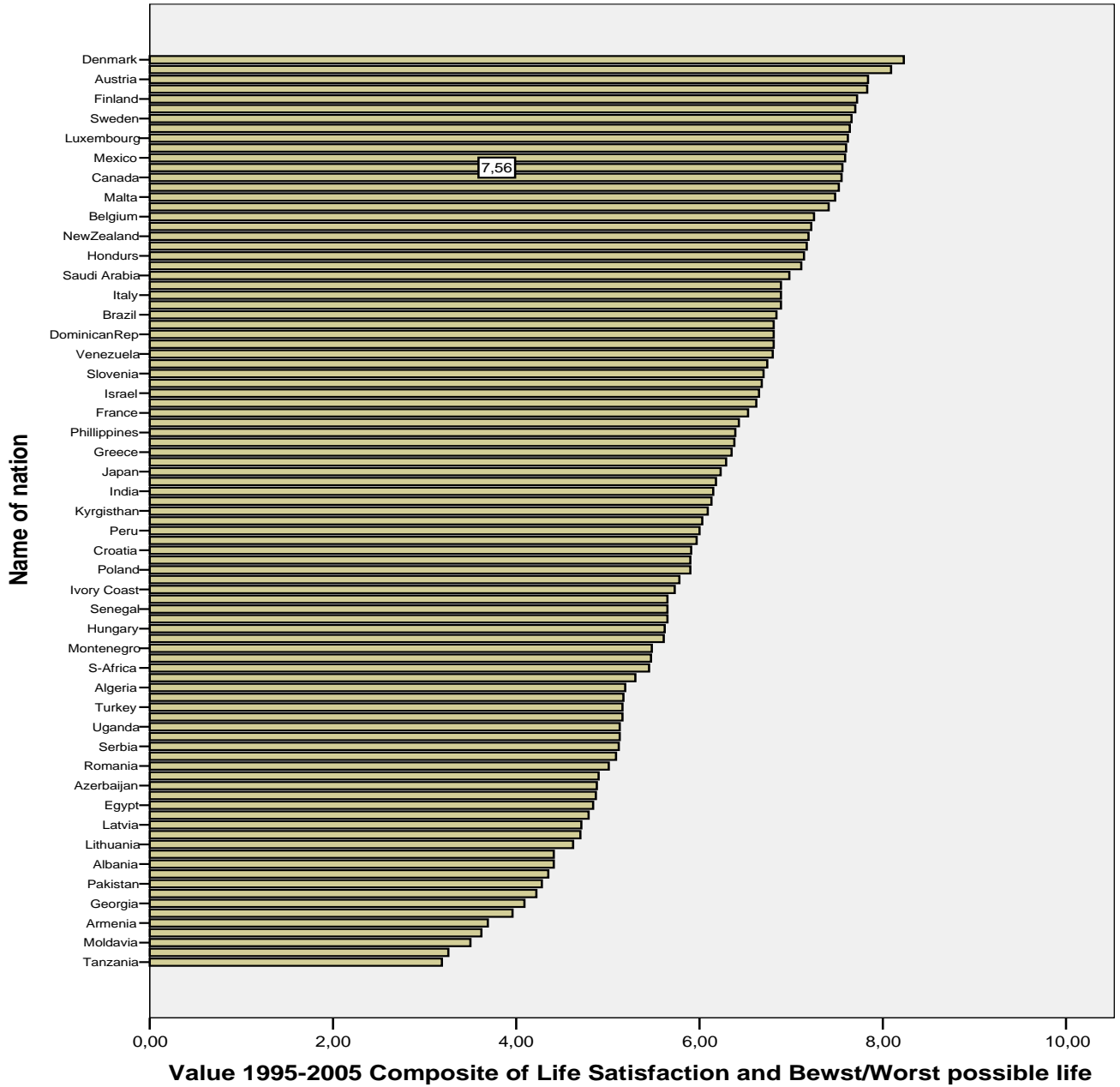
Happiness is a neglected subject in sociology. The main reason seems to be that common sociological theories continue to prevent us taking a proper perspective on the matter

Figure 1
Life-satisfaction in EU 1999



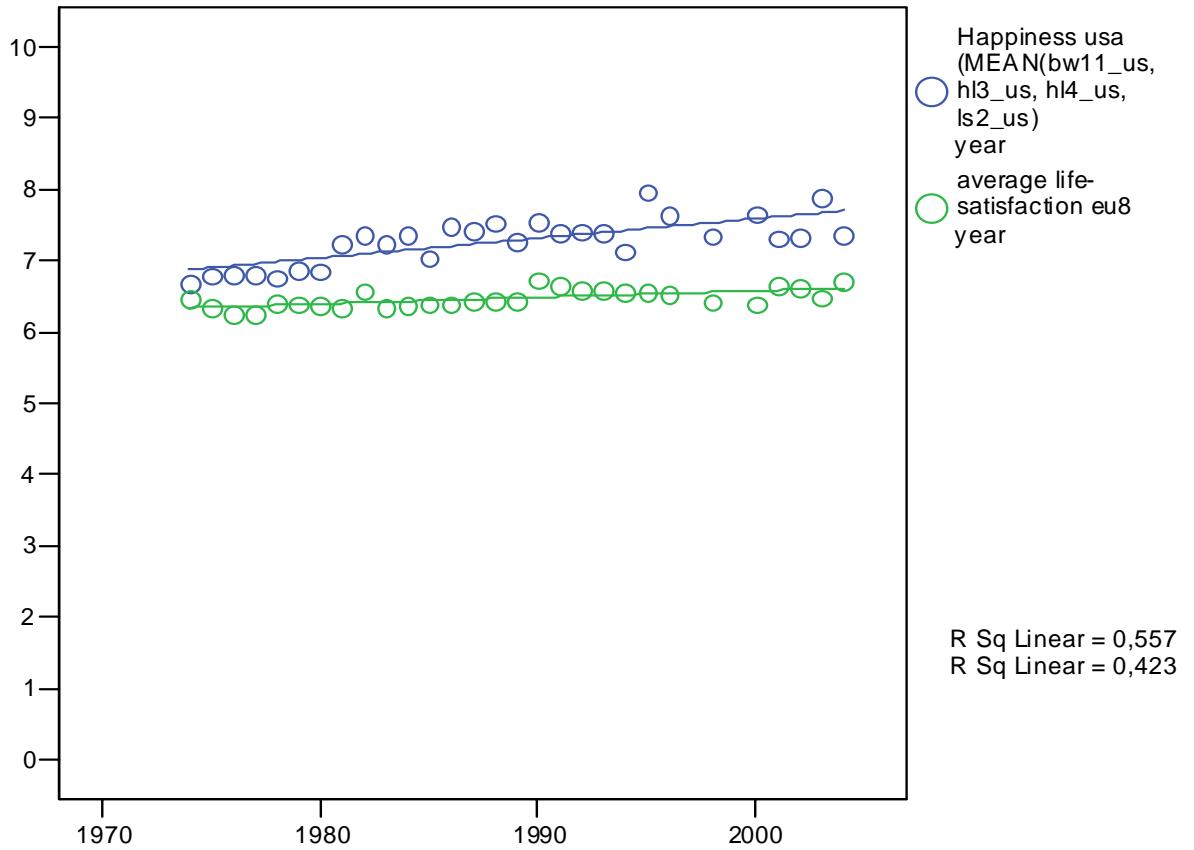
Data: World Values Survey in: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden⁵

Figure 2
Average happiness in 90 nations around 2000



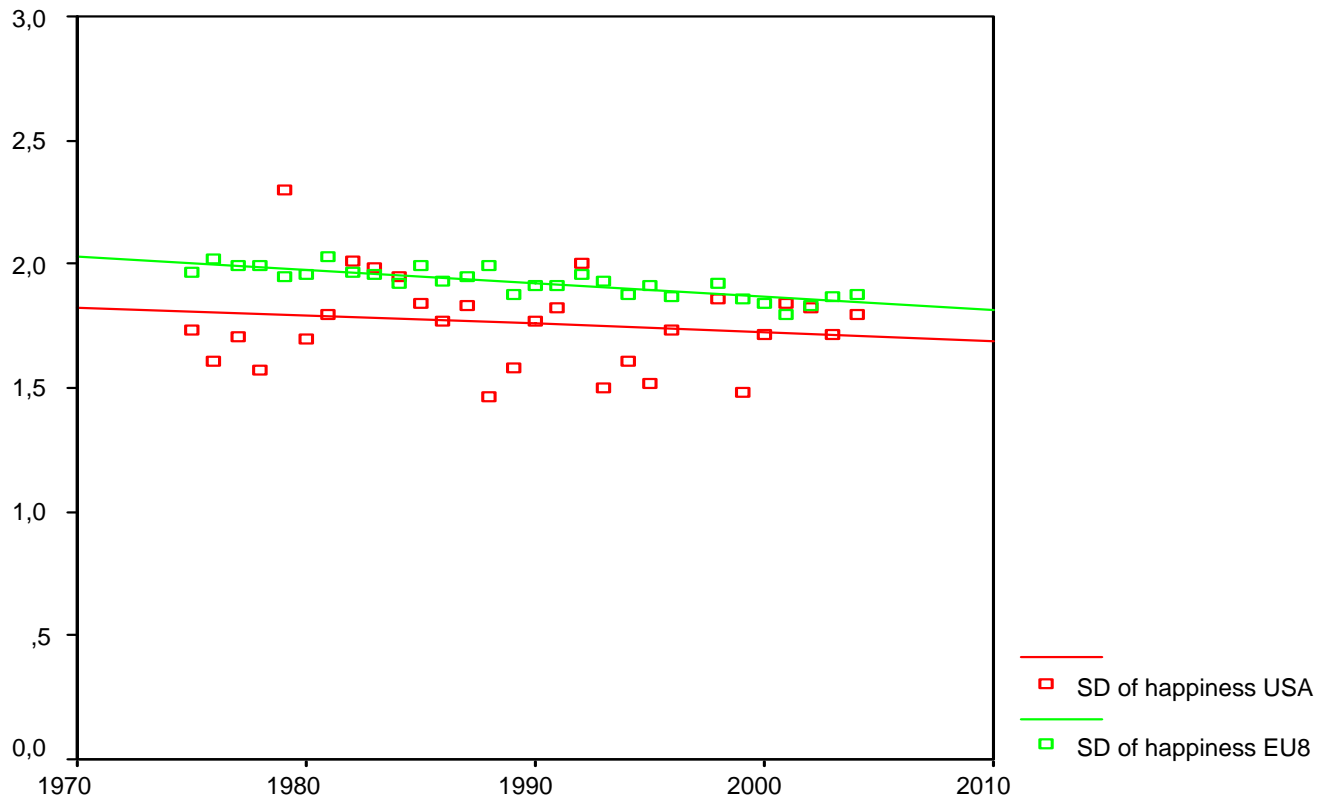
Data: World Database of Happiness, section Happiness in Nations, Rank Report 2007-1

Figure 3
Trend average happiness in 8 EU nations and the USA, 1973-2003



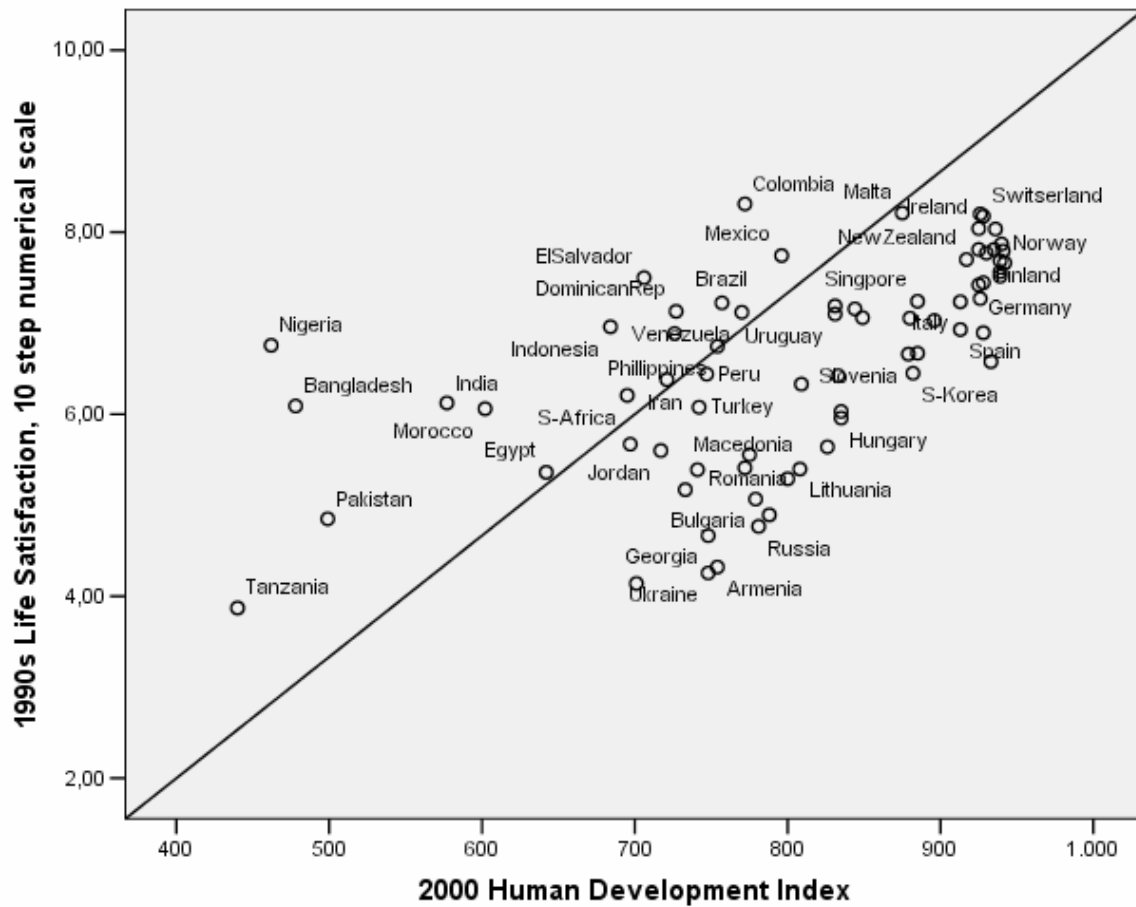
Data: World Database of Happiness (WDH 2007), Data file Trends in Nations

Figure 4
Trend inequality of happiness in 8 EU nations and the USA, 1973-2003



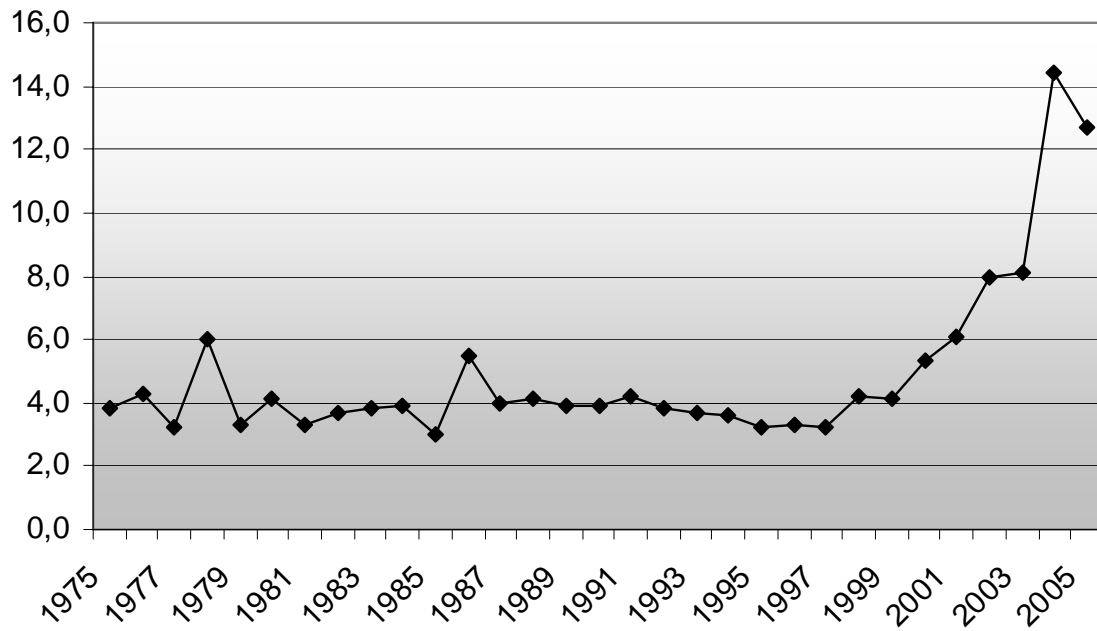
Data: World Database of Happiness (WDH 2007), Data file Trends in Nations

Figure 5
Average happiness and modernity in nations in 2000



Data: World Database of Happiness (WDH 2007), Data file States of Nations

Figure 6
Use of terms 'Happiness' or 'life-satisfaction' in Sociological Abstracts
In promiles



NOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16th World Congress of Sociology Working Group 06 Social Indicators, Durban, South Africa, 23-29 July 2006. I thank Piet Ouweneel for his analysis of happiness in the Sociological Abstracts.
- ² Analysis of 100 abstracts using the word 'satisfaction' in the period 2005 to September 2006. Half these abstracts used the term in a neutral way.
- ³ A similar preoccupation with negative things exists in psychology. Recently that has given rise to a counter-movement called 'positive psychology'. A comparable movement has not developed in sociology as yet.
- ⁴ Need theory of happiness is also named 'livability theory' and in this case the emphasis is on the conditions that allow need gratification
- ⁵ Scores weighted by number of inhabitants

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