

HOPE AND HAPPINESS

Ruut Veenhoven

Opentia Newsletter, 5 (3) 5, December 2015

Hope and happiness are obviously related. Hope will typically add to happiness and happiness will feed hope. Yet empirical research does not always find strong positive correlations and sometimes even negative links. To understand these differences we must first of all define the concepts and consider the measurement of these.

1 HOPE

Hope is the expectation that things will turn out well in the future. The higher the perceived probability of a good outcome the more hope. Expected ‘things’ can be trivial, such as a sunny day tomorrow or of major importance, such as surviving an illness. In the context of this analysis of relation of hope with happiness I will deal with the expectation that major things will turn out well. Such ‘major things’ can be a specific part of life, such as one’s career, or life as a whole. In this paper I focus on hope in the sense of expectation that life as a whole will turn out well.

This kind of hope has been measured in several ways. In one approach hope is seen as a personality trait and measured with questionnaires that tap a general tendency to be optimistic about the future. A related approach is to think of hope as an attitude to the future, which is often measured using single questions. A variant of this approach is asking people how happy they think they will be in the future, typically in the next 5 years. In that context, people are typically also asked to rate their happiness in the past 5 years and in the present, so that hope for a better life appears in the difference.

2 HAPPINESS

Happiness is the subjective enjoyment of one’s life-as-a-whole as experienced in the present. A synonym is ‘life satisfaction’. Like hope, happiness is a subjective phenomenon that is measured using questioning. A common question reads: ‘Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied you with your life as a whole are these days? Please express in a number between 0 and 10, where 0 stands for ‘totally dissatisfied’ en 10 for ‘totally satisfied’. Such questions are often used in survey studies and the research findings obtained with them are stored in the World Database of Happiness. This ‘findings archive’ developed during the past decade and contains now some 13.000 research results.

3 HOW HOPE AND HAPPINESS RELATE

One of the subject categories in the World Database of Happiness is ‘Hope’. To date this category counts 84 research findings. Each finding is described on a ‘finding page’ using a standard format and terminology. These pages are available online at http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_cor/desc_topic.php?tid=1603. Going through the finding pages the following patterns catch the eye.

4 CORRELATION

Hope and happiness tend to go hand in hand, but not always. Studies all over the world found positive correlations, especially when hope was measured as an optimistic stance or as a positive attitude to the future. A recent study in Germany found that optimistic people score about one point higher on the 0-10 happiness scale than pessimists and that this difference exceeds the effects of unemployment or divorce (Piper 2014). The difference was greatest for moderate optimists, which suggests that more optimism is not always better. Yet correlations are much smaller and sometimes even negative when hope is measured by the expectation to get happier than one is now

5 EFFECTS OF HOPE ON HAPPINESS

Hope can affect happiness in several ways. One reason for the positive correlations is obviously that hope is rewarding in itself, a bleak outlook on the future generating stress. Next to that, hope will mostly encourage behavior that feeds happiness in the long run, if you do not hope for success in love you will never try to. Trait hopeful people will thus have built more resources in the past. Yet unrealistic hope can also reduce happiness, for instance if it holds you captive in an irreparable marriage.

6 EFFECTS OF HAPPINESS ON HOPE

Likewise happiness will affect hope. The positive experience of the present will affect the perception of the future. Happiness has also beneficial consequences, such as better health, which on their turn feed hope. Yet happiness can also work out negatively on hope. If you are happy already, you can hardly get happier in the future and are even at risk of getting a bit less happy. When it comes to getting happier than one is at present, the unhappy have a better chance.

Full text available in Leo Bormans (Ed) The Worldbook of Hope, Lannoo Publishing 2015, Belgium, pp. 204-207