

THE WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

A findings-archive

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ABSTRACT

The World Database of Happiness is an electronic findings-archive, tailored to meet the requirements of assembling research findings on happiness defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole. The archive consists of some 20.000 electronic 'finding pages' on which an empirical observation is described on a standard format using a standard terminology. Pages are sorted in many ways, such as on subject, method and the people investigated. Each finding page has a unique internet address to which links can be made in review papers. This allows for the presentation of many research findings in a few tabular overviews. Use of this tool for research synthesis will facilitate the accumulation of knowledge on happiness.

Key words: literature review, research synthesis, findings archive, life satisfaction, subjective wellbeing

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1 HAPPINESS RESEARCH – The Past

Happiness was a major theme already in early Greek philosophy and gained renewed interest during the later Western-European Enlightenment (Mauzi 1960). The philosophic tradition has produced a lot of ideas, but little factual knowledge, philosophers have raised more questions about happiness than they have answered. Most of the controversies they have raised cannot be solved by the logic of reasoning, and settlement of arguments based on reality checks has long been handicapped by a lack of adequate research techniques.

Rise of empirical research

In the 20th century, the social sciences brought about a breakthrough. New empirical research methods opened the possibility to identify conditions for happiness inductively and to test theories. This instigated a lot of research, most of which is embedded in the then newly established specializations of 'social indicators research', 'health related quality of life research' and more recently in 'positive psychology' and 'happiness economics'.

After take-off in the 1970s, the average annual growth rate has been approximately 5%. The number of research reports published in 2022 on happiness defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole is estimated to be some 800. To date (Januari 2023), this has resulted in some 16.000 scientific publications on happiness.

Stagnating understanding

All this empirical research on happiness has not yet crystallized into a sound body of knowledge. Preliminary questions about conceptualization and measurement are now fairly well solved, but our understanding of determinants and consequences of happiness is still tentative and very incomplete. Four reasons are opposing a better understanding:

Conceptual confusion

The first reason is 'confusion of tongues'. As there is no consensus on use of words in the field, it is quite difficult to select the data that pertain to happiness in a particular sense, such as my usage here of happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction.

Lack of overview

The second reason for the stagnation in the field is lack of coordination. There is much redundancy in the research on happiness: the same issues are investigated over and over again, in the same way, e.g., the correlation between happiness and income. A related problem is that the research findings are very scattered and most of the observations cannot be traced in bibliographical systems. Consequently, many of the findings get lost.

Little view on contingencies

A more basic reason for the stagnation in the study of happiness lies in the dominant research approach. The bulk of empirical happiness studies consist of cross-sectional surveys within particular countries. Typically, investigators try to identify universal conditions for happiness using local correlates. Yet, conditions for happiness are probably not the same at all times and in all places; neither are its consequences. Identification of contingencies requires that many studies are compared in a systematic meta-analysis, which on its turn requires that the available findings be compiled and made comparable

Little view on causality

Correlations say little about cause and effect. Separation of cause and effect requires panel studies and experiments. Such studies are scarce as yet, and the results are difficult to retrieve. Progress in the field requires at least that these scattered findings be brought together.

2 The World Database of Happiness – The present

A findings-archive can help to overcome these problems (Veenhoven et al 2021). The World Database of Happiness is a findings-archive tailored to harvest the research findings on happiness defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole. The database is free available on internet at: <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl> The start page is shown on [Figure 1](#).

2.1 Conceptual focus

Happiness is defined as the *subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole*; in other words: how much one likes the life one leads. Within this concept of overall happiness, two 'components' of happiness are discerned: an 'affective' component called *hedonic level of affect* and a 'cognitive' component called *contentment*. This conceptualization of happiness is delineated in more detail in my book 'Conditions of Happiness' (Veenhoven 1984) and more recently in a paper entitled 'How do we assess how happy we are?' (Veenhoven 2009).

Selection of publications:

All publications that use the word 'happiness' or related words in the title, abstract or contents are called in and inspected for fit with the above concept of happiness. This involves a lot of reading. Publications that pass the test are entered in the Bibliography of Happiness in which the main subjects are noted.

Selection of empirical studies

If such a publication reports an empirical investigation, the next step is to check whether the measure of happiness used in the study fits the above definition of happiness adequately. This appears often not to be the case, since many questionnaires purportedly dealing with happiness measure broader phenomena, such as 'positive mental health' or satisfaction with particular domains of life rather than satisfaction with life as a whole. Detail about this selection is found [here](#).

2.2 Building blocks

The basic elements of the database are electronic *pages*, which are linked in various ways. *Pages* are organized in *collections*, from which *reports* are generated. *Reports* are bunches of pages on a particular subject or country

Pages

Four kinds of pages are involved: pages on 1) a particular publication, 2) a particular study, 3) a particular measure of happiness and a 4) particular research finding. All these pages use a standard format and a standard vocabulary. Each page has a unique internet address to which links can be made in review papers. An example of a finding page is given on [Figure 2](#).

Collections

The above-mentioned *pages* are gathered in *collections*. The World Database of Happiness has four such collections: 1) the [Bibliography of Happiness](#), 2) the collection of [Measures of Happiness](#), 3) the collection of [Distributional findings](#) and 4) the collection of [Correlational Findings](#).

The way in which these collections are linked is depicted in the flowchart on [Figure 1](#).

Reports

Research findings are automatically assembled and presented in reports. [Nation reports](#) gather all the findings in a country. [Figure 3](#) presents the start page of the nation report on the UK. [Rank-reports](#) list how well nations do happiness wise in the last 10-year period. [Trend reports](#) show changes of happiness in nations over the years.

2.4 Uses of the World Database of Happiness

Getting an overview

The database provides an overview of the available research on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction; not only of publications on the subject, but also of measures used and of results with respect to how happy people are (distributional findings) and what tend to go with more or less happiness in what conditions (correlational findings).

Preparation for research synthesis

The database puts the findings into order for a research synthesis by 1) describing all research findings in a standard format and terminology, 2) homogenizing the statistics used to describe the findings as far as possible and 3) sorting the findings by subject and methodology.

Presentation in review papers

The database allows for a new way of reporting research findings in a review paper. Using links to online finding pages, a lot of information can be condensed into a tabular overview. An example is given on [Figure 4](#).

3 The Future of the World Database on Happiness

Though the World Database of Happiness was initiated to deal with the growing steam of research findings on happiness it is now succumbing under that multitude. Keeping the database up-to-date is requires some 3 full-time equivalents per year. Until now I could manage with the help of a team of volunteers but after my time (I am aged 80) more man power is required. As yet (January 2023), I have not found the necessary funding, so I prepared for the scenario that the database will no longer be maintained.

Storage of the database as I left it

The database will be stored in the Library of Erasmus University Rotterdam, which will keep the website in the air. The [Foundation for the Study of Happiness](#) will keep an eye on the continuous availability of the database.

Options for continuation

The software and contents are free available for parties who want to go on with this source, either continue the database as a whole, or build on parts of it, such as the Bibliography. Instructions for such restarts are given on the website on the page [Continuation of this database](#). If not continued, the World Database of Happiness will still provide a useful archive of the empirical research on happiness up to 2020 on which further research can build.

Wider use of the technique

The technique of a findings archive can be applied to other subjects of empirical research, on other topics in research on wellbeing in particular. The more research findings are produced, the more profitable research synthesis becomes and the more required will be techniques to harvest the available findings and put them in order for synthetic analysis.

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Figure 1
Start page of the World Database of Happiness



WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[This database](#) ▶ [Collections](#) ▶ [Search](#) ▶ [Reports](#) ▶ [Related](#) ▶ [Research Field](#) ▶ [FAQs](#) ▶ [About us](#) ▶ [Join us](#)

Harvesting Happiness Research

In order to get happier, we must know what makes us happy. Policy makers must know in what kinds of societies and organizations people feel happiest. Individuals must know what ways of life tend to add most to the happiness of their kind of people.

Scientific research on happiness is booming, but its results are difficult to overview, due to terminological Babel and the growing number of studies, which is now passed more than 800 each year.

In the World Database of Happiness, we gather all the research findings on happiness in the sense of life-satisfaction. We describe these findings in a standard format and terminology on electronic 'finding pages' which are sorted by subject, place, time and methodology. This provides an overview of the available research findings on happiness and prepares for quantitative research synthesis. For more detail read ["What is this World Database of Happiness?"](#)

Key points in: [中国](#), [Deutsch](#), [English](#), [Español](#), [Français](#), [Nederlands](#).

[How to search in this source](#)



23180
DISTRIBUTIONAL
FINDINGS


23212
CORRELATIONAL
FINDINGS



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Figure 2
Example of a finding page in the World Database of happiness




WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS
 ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE
 ▶ This database ▶ Collections ▶ Search ▶ Reports ▶ Related ▶ Research Field ▶ FAQs ▶ About us ▶ Join us

Study [World Values Survey \(2004\): study AL 2002](#)


Public:	18+ aged, general public, Albania, 2002
Survey name:	INT-WorldValuesSurvey 4
Sample:	Probability multi-stage random
Respondents:	N = 1000
Non Response:	48
Assessment:	Interview: face-to-face

Happiness measure(s)

Full text:	Self report on single question:	
	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as-a-whole these days?	
	1 dissatisfied	
	2	
	3	
	4	
	5	
	6	
	7	
	8	
	9	
	10 satisfied	
Classification:	O-SLW-c-sq-n-10-a	
Page in publication:	a170	
Observed distribution		
Frequencies	1: 4.6%, 2: 6%, 3: 15.4%, 4: 15.9%, 5: 16.7%, 6: 11.7%, 7: 11.3%, 8: 10.2%, 9: 5.3%, 10: 2.7% (total 99.8%)	
Summary Statistics	On original range 1 - 10	On range 0-10
Mean:	5.17	4.63
SD:	2.25	2.50



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Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization

Figure 3
Example of a nation report in the World Database of Happiness

WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS
 ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

▸ This database ▸ Collections ▸ Search ▸ Reports ▸ Related ▸ Research Field ▸ FAQs ▸ About us ▸ Join us

Findings on happiness in United Kingdom [print](#)

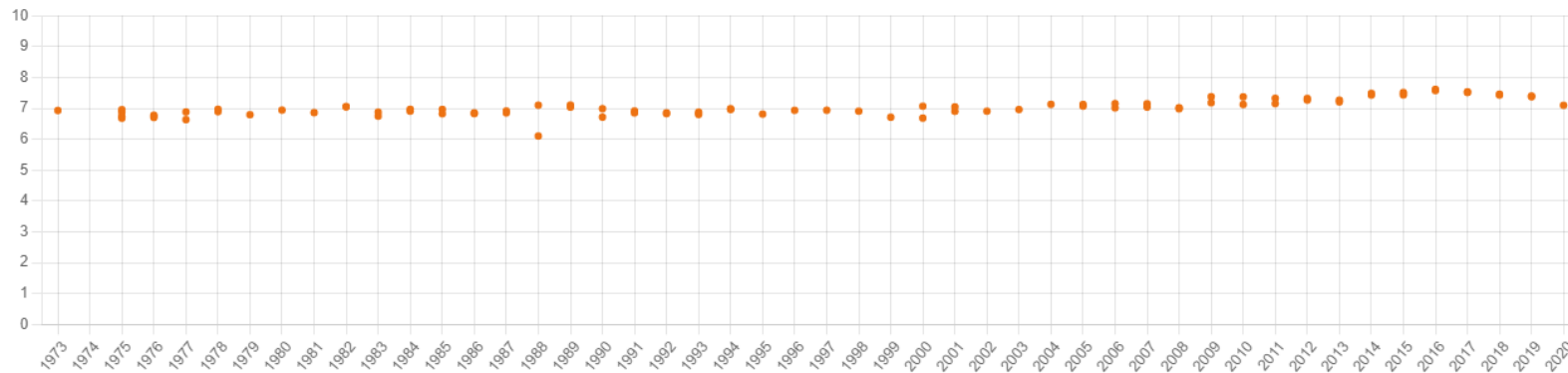
Distributional **Correlational**

Distributional findings describe how happy people are in different times, places and publics in United Kingdom. The boxes show the value of each indicator and the position of that nation in comparison with the rest of the nations.

Rank in the world (2010-2019)



Trend of happiness over time



By Public

General Public

Special Publics

AGE groups
AGE groups > Adults
AGE groups > Adults > Middle aged
AGE groups > Adults > Working age
AGE groups > Elderly
AGE groups > Twens
AGE groups > Various age groups
AGE groups > Young adults
AGE groups > Youth > Basic school children
AGE groups > Youth > Infants
AGE groups > Youth > Teens, adolescents
EDUCATION > Highschool pupils

By Place

Whole Nation

Regions in nation

Aberdeen City
Aberdeenshire
Anglesey, Isle of
Angus
Argyll & Bute
Avon,Gloucestershire,Wiltshire
Bath and North East Somerset UA
Bedford UA
Bedfordshire,Hertfordshire
Blackburn with Darwen UA
Blackpool UA
Blaenau Gwent

Methodological Notes

1. *Rank in the world* is based on the *happiness measure types* available for most countries. For this period (2010-2019) in United Kingdom these are:

10-step numeral LifeSatisfaction (122F)

11-step numeral LifeSatisfaction (122G)

2. The *Trend over time* chart is based on *happiness measure types* for which most points are available over all years.

For United Kingdom that is:

4-step verbal LifeSatisfaction (121C)

All distributional findings on happiness by measure type and by year in the general public of United Kingdom

-
-
-

Continued at: <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/nations/united-kingdom-16/>

Figure 4

Example of use of the World Database of Happiness in a research synthesis: Overview of 75 findings on happiness and home-ownership

HOME-OWNERSHIP	RESEARCH METHODS						
	Cross-sectional			Longitudinal		Experimental	
	Zero-order	partial		Zero-order	Partial	Zero-order	Partial
Owned (vs Not)	+ + + + +	+ +	+ /+ + +	+ +			
			+ /- - + /+ +				
			+ 0 + 0				
			0 0 0/- - +				
Owned (vs Rent)	+ + + +		+ /+ + + +			+ + +	+ +
	+ ++ ++		+ + 0 + /+ +			+ +	
	++ ++ ++ ++		+ /0 + +				
	++ + ++ + +						
Owned partially (vs not)			- /- +				
Owned (vs used free of charge)							
Rented (vs used free of charge)							
Redemption (vs used free of charge)							
Usufruct (vs used free of charge)							
Used free of charge (vs not)							

Signs link to finding pages in [World Database of Happiness](#). Use control+click to view the page.

Source: Veenhoven et al. (2021b)