

Handbook of Social Indicators and Quality of Life Research

HAPPINESS:

Also known as 'life-satisfaction' and 'subjective well-being'

Ruut Veenhoven, Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

In: Kenneth C. Land, Alex C. Michalos, and M. Joseph Sirgy (Eds.) *Handbook of Social Indicators and Quality of Life Research*. 2012 Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Publishers. page 63-77. DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-2421-1_3.

Happiness is a main goal, most individuals reach out for a happy life and many policy makers aim at greater happiness for a greater number. This pursuit of happiness calls for understanding of conditions for happiness and for that reason the subject has received much attention in the history of western thought. 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 chapter presents an account of this field.

The literature on happiness can be framed within some key-questions that 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?

1. WHAT IS 'HAPPINESS'?

The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life' and denotes both individual and social welfare. This use of words suggests that there is one ultimate good and disguises differences in interest between individuals and society. It further suggests that all merits can be integrated in one final scale of worth, which is not the case. The term is merely an umbrella for different notions of what is good. Below I will delineate four qualities of life and show that the concept of happiness fits only one of these.

1.1 Four qualities of life

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. That classification is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (2000).

The first distinction is between chances and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between 'external' and 'internal'

Correspondence: Prof. Dr. Ruut Veenhoven Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, P.O.B. 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, Netherlands. www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven

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