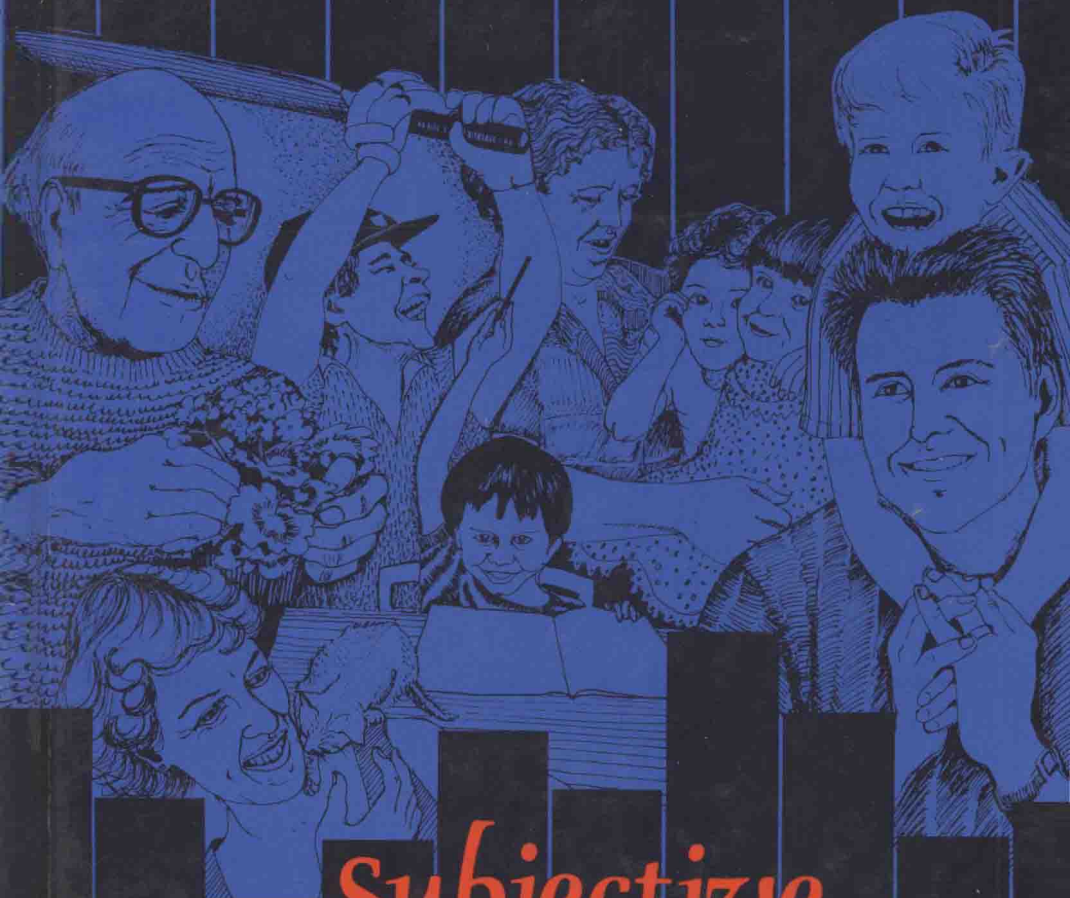


INTERNATIONAL SERIES IN
EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY



Subjective Well-Being

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

EDITED BY
FRITZ STRACK, MICHAEL ARGYLE
AND NORBERT SCHWARZ

Pergamon Press

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1

Introduction

FRITZ STRACK, MICHAEL ARGYLE and NORBERT SCHWARZ

The happiness of the human species has always been at the focus of attention of the humanities. Its manifestations were prime topics for literary and poetic descriptions. Its possibility has been an issue in philosophy ever since Plato and Seneca. The great religions gained their attraction partly from their recipes for reaching this goal. Political ideologies centred around the ideal society that would guarantee ultimate happiness. Economists developed quantitative measures to describe a whole nation's well-being (see Chapter 5) while social scientists, noting the shortcomings of economic indices, concerned themselves with various social indicators to describe the quality of life.

And psychology? Most interestingly, psychology has been preoccupied less with the conditions of well-being, than with the opposite: the determinants of human unhappiness (cf. Diener, 1984). Why? Was it because psychology was often more concerned with the dark side of human nature? Was it because psychology was only called upon when people were suffering and needed help? Was it because negative states and events elicit a stronger need for causal explanations than positive experiences (cf. Böhner, Bless, Schwarz and Strack, 1988)? The answer will remain speculative.

However, psychology has made up for this apparent deficit during the past twenty years (cf. Argyle, 1987). Subjective well-being has meanwhile become an established topic of research that has received attention from both basic and applied perspectives. The cognitive and affective mechanisms have been studied extensively (see Chapter 5), and integrating theoretical models have emerged from this endeavour. The psychological importance of happiness has been recognized for most aspects of social and private life. As a consequence, the topic has attracted interest from several fields of psychology. The conditions of happiness and satisfaction are being studied within the domains of clinical as well as cross-cultural psychology,

in social as well as in industrial/organizational and in personality psychology, to name only a few areas.

Given this growing interest in the topic and its apparent interdisciplinary nature, the idea of inviting representatives from different areas of psychology (and the neighbouring social sciences) to contribute their perspectives on the joint theme was clearly desirable. It is the intention of the present volume to document these divergent perspectives on the common issue of subjective well-being and to foster communication between these areas.

The book starts out with a series of fundamental questions that are pertinent to all research perspectives. In his discussion, Veenhoven raises several conceptual and methodological issues that have been important for the study of subjective well-being. In the next chapter, Schwarz and Strack demonstrate that reports of happiness and satisfaction can be viewed as judgments that are influenced by various affective and cognitive mechanisms. On the basis of a series of experimental findings, they suggest a theoretical model to account for these influences. Headey, on the other hand, uses ideas and concepts from economics to explain his findings of temporal stability and change of reported subjective well-being.

The second part of the book focuses on more specific research issues that are important for a better understanding of the general phenomenon. Argyle and Martin give a comprehensive review of empirical findings that elucidate the causal role of different life domains, especially social relationships, work and leisure. Tversky and Griffin generate some provocative conclusions on the basis of the observation that a hedonically relevant event can exert two opposing influences on judgments of well-being. They argue that the same event may make a person both happy and unhappy and describe a dilemma in which humans tend to choose courses of action that may decrease their happiness. Diener, Sandvik and Pavot look at hedonic experiences as a source of happiness. They provide results showing that the frequency of affect is more important than intensity for individuals' well-being. Lewinsohn, Redner and Seeley report data that allow them to triangulate "life satisfaction" in relation to other psychosocial variables, above all in its relation to depression.

The third part of the book emphasizes the social context in which people experience and report their happiness and satisfaction. Brandstätter describes findings that demonstrate how aspects of the social situation and personality interact in their influence on positive and negative emotions. The cultural context of subjective well-being is the focus of a comparative study by Csikszentmihalyi and Mei-Ha Wong. These authors compared the personal and situational concomitants of happiness for American and Italian teenagers and speculate about universal and culture-specific features of subjective well-being. Filipp and Klauer studied people's ability to maintain their sense of well-being under situations that are least conducive for gener-

ating happiness—stressful life events, like terminal illness. Furnham's chapter reviews theories about work and its relationship to leisure (see Chapter 5) and shows the causes of job satisfaction. The chapter by Glatzer gives a report of subjective well-being at a national level. On the basis of reports from a representative sample of respondents, it provides a comprehensive picture of the quality of life experienced in West Germany.

The present book is based on a conference that was held in Bad Homburg in 1987. The editors would like to express their sincere thanks to the Werner-Reimers-Foundation for its generous funding of this conference. Special gratitude goes to Kerstin Matthias for her invaluable support in proof reading and editing the final manuscript and to Claudia Halvorson for preparing the indices.

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General Perspectives

2

Questions on happiness: classical topics, modern answers, blind spots

RUUT VEENHOVEN¹

Introduction

Happiness is a longstanding theme in Western thought. It came under scrutiny in the following three periods: (1) Antique Greek philosophy; (2) Post-Enlightenment West-European moral philosophy, Utilitarianism in particular; and (3) Current Quality-of-Life research in the rich welfare states. Printed reflections on all this contemplation now fill a hundred metres of bookshelves.

This paper takes stock of the progress made on seven classical topics. Are we now any wiser? Or is Dodge (1930) right in his contention that “the theory of the happy life has remained on about the same level that the ancient Greeks left it”? This inventory will differ from the usual review articles. The focus will not be on current technical research issues, but rather on the broader questions that prompted the enquiry. Furthermore, the aim is not only to enumerate advances in understanding, but also to mark the blind spots.

The following issues will be considered:

1. What is happiness?
2. Can happiness be measured?
3. Is unhappiness the rule?
4. How do people assess their happiness?
5. What conditions favour happiness?
6. Can happiness be promoted?
7. Should happiness be promoted?

These scientific issues do not emerge in a social vacuum, but are rooted

in broader moral and political debates. Questions 1 and 7 are part of an ongoing ethical discussion about value priorities. Which values should guide us? How should we rank values such as “wisdom”, “equality”, “justice”, “freedom” and “happiness”? Together with question 5, these issues also figure in the related political debates about socio-economic priorities. Should the emphasis be on national economic growth or on individual well-being? Who are the deprived in our society? How can their suffering best be reduced?

Questions 2 to 6 further link up with the discussion about the possibilities and dangers of socio/political technocracy. Will our understanding of human and social functioning ever allow the deduction of optimal policies? Will the political system ever be able to put such policies into practice? If so, will not the remedy be worse than the disease, and bring about a “Brave New World”? Questions 3 to 6 relate to the broad argument between pessimists and optimists. They are all issues in the discussion as to whether current society is rotten or not, and whether social development holds any promise for a better one. Questions 4 and 5 are relevant in the debate on human nature. Is happiness the result of rational consideration or of following blind instincts? Has human happiness anything to do with the real good or can we be happy in any condition? Finally, question 3 is an issue in the ongoing discussion about the legitimacy of the political order. If most people feel happy under the current régime, why change it? For that reason, conservatives tend to claim that we are happy, while revolutionaries try to prove we are not.

What is happiness?

The history of happiness research is the history of confusion. The term has carried many different meanings and has thereby hindered productive thinking enormously. Nowadays, the discussion has largely escaped from this deadlock. In fact, the greatest advance achieved is at the conceptual level.

Part of the problem is not specific to the subject matter but results from the variety of meanings the term happiness has in common language. Because of the lack of conceptual discipline, that confusion of tongues has been continued into the scientific debate. An additional problem is that the seemingly technical discussion about the proper use of words in fact covers up an ideological debate about value priorities. In many arguments the term “happiness” is used as a synonym for “the good”. “Defining” happiness is then propagating an ideology. Therefore, a consensus on the use of the word has never emerged.

Recent conceptual differentiation

In the 1950s the use of concepts such as “welfare”, “adjustment” and “mental health” had much in common with the traditional confusion about “happiness”. Yet in the last few decades social scientists have largely escaped from these deadlocks and have thereby allowed a breakthrough in the conceptualization of happiness. It is now generally agreed that there are many varieties of goodness, which do not necessarily concur. A classification of current concepts is presented by Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1 *Classification of well-being concepts*

	Objective well-being	Subjective well-being	Mixed conceptions
Individual well-being	personal qualities	self-appraisals	
— aspect	Wisdom, stability, hardiness, creativeness, morality, etc.	job satisfaction, self-esteem, control belief	ego strength, identity
— overall	need gratification, self-actualization, effectance	life satisfaction*, contentment, hedonic level.	(mental) health, adjustment, individual morale
Collective	Societal qualities	social (opinion) climate	
— aspect	coherence, justice, equal chances, stability, etc.	acceptance of political order, mutual trust, belief in national progress	social integration, anomaly
— overall	viability, capacity	group morale	livability
Mixed conceptions			
— aspects	economic prosperity, safety, freedom, equality, etc.	emancipation	
— overall	welfare, progress	alienation	well-being in broadest sense

*Focus of this article.

In the table some examples are presented in *italics*. The reader should bear in mind that the enumeration is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Furthermore, most of the terms mentioned are used with other meanings as well and could therefore be classified differently. Elsewhere I have elaborated this classification in more detail (Veenhoven, 1980).

Focus on life satisfaction

This paper will focus on happiness in the sense of life satisfaction. We cannot answer the seven questions for all concepts. Therefore, a choice is required. I choose the overall self-appraisal of life for four reasons: (1) This concept can be fairly precisely defined (see below); (2) the phenomenon thus defined can be measured fairly well (to be demonstrated in the next paragraph); (3) there are empirical data on this matter which allow answers to the questions raised; (4) focusing on an “objective” conception of happiness would involve *a priori* answers to several of the questions under discussion.

Life satisfaction is conceived as the *degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favourably*. In other words: how well he likes the life he leads. The term “happiness” will be used as a synonym.

Next to this “overall” evaluation, this paper will refer to two aspect appraisals of life-as-a-whole [an affective aspect (hedonic level) and a cognitive aspect (contentment)]. Hedonic level is the degree to which the various affects a person experiences are pleasant; in other words: how well he usually feels. Contentment is the degree to which an individual perceives his aspirations to have been met. In other words: to what extent one perceives oneself to have got what one wants in life. These distinctions will prove fruitful in answering the questions asked here. The concepts are described in more detail in Veenhoven, 1984a, chapter 2.

Can happiness be measured?

During the last century frequent discussions have taken place as to whether happiness can be measured. These debates were part of the discussion about the utilitarian moral philosophy, which required some kind of hedonic book-keeping in order to assess the happiness revenues of alternative courses of action. A great deal of that discussion is not relevant for this paper, because it concerns conceptions other than life-satisfaction.

When happiness polls began to be used during the last few decades, the discussion focused on whether subjective appreciation of life can be assessed validly. The following issues figured in that discussion: (1) Can happiness be measured “objectively” or only “subjectively” by questioning? (2) If questioning is the only way, do interviews tap an existing state of mind or do they merely invite a guess? (3) If people do indeed have an idea about their enjoyment of life, do their responses to questions reflect that idea adequately? These questions have instigated a great deal of empirical research and can now be fairly well answered.

“Measurement” was long understood as “objective”, “external” assessment, analogous to the measurement of blood-pressure by a doctor. It is now clear that life satisfaction cannot be measured that way. Steady physio-