

HOPE AND HAPPINESS

More optimism is not always better

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"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 define the concepts and consider the measurement of these," says Prof. Ruut Veenhoven, one of the world's leading experts in happiness research. Hope is the expectation that things will turn out well in the future.

HOPE

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 the 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.

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: "Taken all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please express in a number between 0 and 10, where 0 stands for 'totally dissatisfied' and 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 now contains some 13,000 research results.

HOPE AND HAPPINESS

One of the 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. Going through the finding pages, the following patterns catch the eye.

Correlations

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.

Causal effects

Hope can affect happiness in several ways. One reason for the positive correlations 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 succeed. 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.

Likewise, happiness will affect hope. Positive experience of the present will affect perception perception of the future. Happiness also has beneficial consequences, such as better health, which in turn feeds 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.

THE KEYS

- Hope is the expectation that things will turn out well in the future. Happiness is the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole as experienced in the present.
- Hope and happiness tend to go hand in hand, especially when hope is measured as an optimistic stance or as a positive attitude to the future. Correlations are much smaller when hope is measured by the expectation to get happier than one is now.
- Hope can affect happiness in several ways. Likewise, happiness will affect hope. But when it comes to getting happier than one is at present, the unhappy have a better chance.

Ruut Veenhoven is emeritus professor of social conditions for human happiness at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam (The Netherlands). His current affiliations are Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organisation (EHERO) and Optentia Research Group of NorthWest University, South Africa. He is often called the “Happiness Professor” and is respected worldwide for his lifelong research on the subjective quality of life. His major publications are *Conditions of Happiness* and *Informed pursuit of happiness*. Ruut Veenhoven is founding editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and founder and director of the World Database of Happiness. More at www.worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl