

HOW SATISFYING IS RURAL LIFE? FACT AND VALUE

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Summary

It is widely believed that life in the country is more satisfying than life in the city. This belief is propagated in romantic arts as well as in some social scientific theories. The belief is firmly rooted in public opinion, especially in the most urbanized parts of the world. This idea is not without consequences for planological decisions.

The belief is false however. Analysis of various studies on life-satisfaction shows no advantage of rural dwelling. In developed countries rural people tend to be equally satisfied with life as city-people. In the underdeveloped countries rural dwellers are markedly less happy than city-dwellers. Some explanations for the discrepancy between belief and reality are suggested.

1 INTRODUCTION

The human species evolved some 2.000.000 years ago. Its natural habitat was the savannah, where our forefathers made their living by hunting and gathering. This way of existence required frequent moving. Therefore the greatest part of our ancestors has lived without permanent settlement. Permanent settlement became the rule only after the agrarian revolution, which seems to have started some 10.000 year ago. Most people came to live in farmhouses, often grouped in villages. A few villages developed in towns and even cities. However, the percentage of the population that lived in an urban setting remained small in agrarian society. In Medieval Europe some 90% of the population lived in the country. This pattern was changed drastically after the industrial revolution. In less than two centuries massive urbanisation took place. Currently more than half of mankind lives in towns and cities. In most parts of the world the movement from the country to cities is going on. In the parts where the development seems to have halted only 20% of the population lives in a rural setting.

Curiously, this massive exodus from the land to the city is not accompanied by negative attitudes to rural living. In fact the reverse occurs; the less rural life is practised, the more it is cherished and the greater the emphasis on the hazards of urban life. These counter-trends attitudes are visible in various genres of art, in scientific themes and in public opinion.

1.1 Artistic notions of pastoral paradise

In the after days of agrarian society a new artistic theme emerged: the theme of pastoral idyll. Lyrics, novels and paintings came to emphasise the beauty of nature and the virtues of rural life. This theme was part of a broader cultural stream known as Romanticism. Producers and consumers of the genre were typically the urbanized elites. The theme is still alive. Nowadays it also manifests in film and photography.

A constant undertone in this theme is that rural living is more satisfying than life in town. Natural environment and rural society are depicted as an oasis in urban desert. On the country one finds safe simple serenity, needed so desperately by the alienated city dweller. See Quennel (1988) for a review.

1.2 Scientific theories of urban malaise

The idea that we thrive better in the country than in cities lives among social scientists as well. Several theories have been advanced.

One view is that human nature is not fitted to urban life. It is argued that the human species has developed in a green and spacious natural environment. Therefore we would not thrive in an artificial urban environment of stone and crowding. Our senses would not be suited to comprehend the chaotic urban environment: we would fall prey to perception 'overstimulation'. On the other hand our motoric functions would remain understimulated. These arguments are discussed in more detail by Maddox (1982)

In the same line, it is claimed that we were build to live in small bounds of intimates. For that reason we could not live happily in an anonymous urban mass (f.e. Eibl-Eibesfeld & Hass 1985).

A related argument is that differences in scale affect social organisation. A rural setting would favour the development of small communities, based on shared morals and face-to-face contact; this type is commonly referred to as 'Gemeinschaft'. Such close social networks would go to pieces in urban settings and be replaced by a pattern of individualisation and anonymous bureaucratic control (Gesellschaft). It is generally believed that Gemeinschaft like rural communities are more effective in providing social support and in exercising social control.

Better social support is seen to materialize in lower incidence of loneliness, mental illness and homelessness than in urban areas. Better social control is seen to reduce crime, divorce and adultery. Together these advantages are seen to make country-man more happy than city-dwellers. These arguments are discussed in more detail by Fisher (1973) and Maddox (1982).

These ideas live in various branches of the social sciences: among social-biologists, among anthropologists, and among Marxist critics of modern society. In the 1960's these notions were greedily received by the 'small is beautiful' movement.

1.3 Public preference for rural living

Are these the ideas of a few western intellectuals against the grain? Certainly not. Survey studies show wide public acceptance: not only in western society, but also in other parts of the world. **Scheme 1** presents the results of survey in 1975 which involved representative samples in six parts of the world. All 8.500 respondents interviewed for this study were asked were they would prefer to live if they were absolutely free to choose. The response options were: a big city (100.000 inhabitants or more), a medium sized city (between 100.000 and 10.000 inhabitants), a small town (less than 10.000 inhabitants) and a village or on the country. **Scheme 1** shows that most people in the present day world would prefer rural living. Big cities are least preferred.

The pattern of preferences is not the same in all parts of the world. The preference for rural living is more pronounced in the 'western' parts of the world, than in Latin America and South-East Asia. The pattern is reversed in South Sahara Africa were only 24% prefers to live in the country and 41% would opt for a big city. The pattern of preference is in fact the reverse of the pattern of settlement. Rural living is preferred more in the most urbanized part of the world, whereas urban living is seen as most desirable in the least urbanized parts.

A similar pattern emerges in the responses to questions about whether one would welcome more industry or more inhabitants in the locality (Angst 1978: 120-136).

1.4 Policy implications

These sentiments are not without consequences. Though they do not stop the ongoing process of urbanisation, they slow it down now and then. They also call for alternative planological policies, such as deconcentration of industry and upgrading of rural infrastructure. This attitude to rural living also affects decisions about urban development. Attempts are made to incorporate rural qualities in the urban environment. For instance by building village-like quarters, by laying-out large parts and restrictions of high rise building. Sub-urbanisation is also facilitated by the belief in better livability of rural settings.

These policies involve lots of money and effort. So it is worthwhile inspecting whether the underlying belief is sound.

2 OBSERVED SATISFACTION IN RURAL AND URBAN SETTINGS

Several investigators have considered the reality value of this belief by comparing satisfaction of people living in rural and urban setting. The results are contradictory at the first sight: some investigators find more satisfaction in rural areas indeed (Donnerwerth et. al.1978., Lawton & Cohen 1974, Sauer et. al. 1976), whereas others report no or little difference (Hynson, Tweeten & Yao-Chi-Lu 1976, Crider et. al. 1991). However a closer look at the findings reveals some consistent patterns. Differences appear to vary with the kind of satisfaction considered and to be contingent on characteristics of society, in particular on economic development.

2.1 Satisfaction with residence

Several studies focus on satisfaction with dwelling: either on global satisfaction with ones living environment or on satisfaction with specific aspects of dwelling, such as ones house, the neighbourhood and local facilities. Studies in western nation show somewhat greater residence satisfaction in rural areas (f.e. Campbell 1981:153, Crider et. al. 1991). However, this is no universal pattern. A study by Salau (1986) in Africa revealed far greater satisfaction with dwelling in urban areas. In fact the pattern of satisfaction with residence is almost identical to the pattern of preferences in [scheme 1](#).

2.2 Satisfaction with life-as-a-whole

Most studies on this matter have taken a broader view and compared global appraisals of life, rather than specific evaluations of dwelling conditions only. These studies typically involve measures of happiness, mood-level and life-satisfaction. Some also compared mental and physical health. Below I will summarize the results of studies on life-satisfaction. Other indicators of overall well-being are patterned similarly.

Data were drawn from the World Database of Happiness, which presents the results of empirical studies of happiness that used indicators which meet certain validity demands (Veenhoven, 1993, 1994). The World Database of Happiness¹ lists 55 studies that related life-satisfaction to rural or urban residence. Because data are presented in different formats, the results are not easily comparable. Therefore I will not present all the available data, but select some illustrative findings.

The global pattern

The greatest study in this selection covers the entire world in 1960. It is based on a sample of nations, stratified by phase of economic development. It involved some 18.000 interviews (Cantril 1965). This study shows greater life-satisfaction in urban areas (Gamma = +.14). The difference is small but statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

Difference between rich and poor nations

A closer look at the separate countries reveals that this tendency is largely due to the poor countries in the sample. In most of these nations a marked difference exists; rural dwellers being far less happy on average than city-dwellers (Brazil, Dominican Republic, Egypt, India, Philippines). In the rich nations average life-satisfaction tends to be at the same level in rural and urban areas (Germany, USA).

This pattern is reproduced if we compare across the various further single nation studies. Again we see sizable difference to the advantage of city dwellers in poor nations and almost no difference in rich nations (EU-nations, Austria, Norway, USA). **Scheme 2** presents some illustrative findings.

However, there are some exceptions: in poor Nigeria no difference appeared in 1960, while in some moderately developed western city dwellers were slightly, but significantly, happier. (Poland 1960, Finland 1966)

Differences through time

The difference between poor and rich nations suggests that the relationship between life-satisfaction and rural residence may change through time. The relative disadvantage of rural living in agrarian society may melt away in the course of industrialisation. In this view one can also imagine that further developments into post-industrial patterns also affect the balance of advantages and disadvantages, possibly now in the advantage of city life.

Only a few studies allow a comparison through time, both studies in rich western nations. Some illustrative results are presented in **scheme 3**. The data suggest that city-life tended to become somewhat more satisfying in Germany between 1978 and 1988, at least if one considers the net-effects. In the USA, the pattern seems to have remained the same between 1972 and 1982.

Some studies show a different development in separate social categories. For instance, in the USA between 1946 and 1966 different patterns have been observed among blacks and whites. Among blacks life in the city became less satisfying relatively, whereas among whites the pattern of non-difference maintained in that period. The relative drop in life-satisfaction of American urban blacks seems as a first sign of post-industrial decay of city life. However, one can also see it as a situation specific temporary phenomenon. At that time many American blacks moved from the country to the city. Problems of adjustment may have depressed average life-satisfaction in this category some time. In that same period settled urban blacks stated their emancipation movement. This movement was successful at first and created a lot of frustration among black urban elites (Manning Gibbs, 1972).

Intermediate settlement patterns on the rural-urban continuum

The above trichotomy of 'rural', 'small town' and 'big city' may be too rough. In all three categories one can think of subdivisions that may be relevant to the quality of life.

The term 'rural' living refers to living in the country as well as to living in a village. The former type of residence is closer to the original human habitat. Hence socio-biological theory would suggest that the difference in life-satisfaction is between living in the open country or not, rather than between living in small or big settlements.

The term 'small town' covers different phenomena as well; small towns in rural areas, as well as suburbs near metropolitan centres. Though comparable in size, these residence contexts differ typically in social organisation. In rural towns 'Gemeinschaft' like patterns prevail, whereas in suburbs people tend to be more individualized and social organisation more like the 'Gesellschaft'. Consequently, social cohesion theory would predict rural towns are more livable than suburbs of the same size.

Lastly, there can also be differences within 'big cities'. Some variants of urban malaise theory suggest that problems of city life augment with city size, and that there is even some break point at which social control mechanisms collapse. In this view one can expect that life-satisfaction differs only in very big cities.

These perspectives merge to some extent in the notion of an 'optimal size of residence'. The existence of such an optimum can be argued on different grounds. From a socio-biological view one can claim that humans are not fitted to living alone, but neither to living in masses, and hence feel best in some intermediate residence context. From a socio-economic perspective of production of goods and services one can conceive optimal settlement sizes as well. It has been suggested that 50,000 inhabitants is the most suitable size (Taylor 1951: 231). Two studies distinguished 8 variants on the rural/urban continuum. Their results are presented in [scheme 4](#). Both studies concern rich western nations. Unfortunately there are no studies of this kind from developing nations.

The differentiations in [scheme 3](#) reveals no great differences in life-satisfaction either. Contrary to the above suggestions life in the open country is not more satisfying than life in villages or cities. Neither is there a clear optimal size of settlement. The only difference that appears within urban areas. Life-satisfaction tends to be slightly higher in suburbs and somewhat lower in big cities. This pattern appears both in Europe and the USA.

Difference in livability or selective migration?

The fact that life-satisfaction tends to be slightly lower in large cities in western nations, does not necessarily mean that large western cities are less livable. The difference can also be caused by selective migration. Among people of rural origin, the unhappy may be somewhat more likely to move to a city, whereas among the city people that move to suburbs or the country the happy may be overrepresented. One reason to assume such selectiveness in migration is that rural-urban migration is linked to social success. The rural people who move to the city are mostly not the ones that cannot make a living in the area where they were born. Typically, they go to the city in search for better chances. Reversely, city dwellers who go 'back' to the country do typically well socio-economically, especially the one who moves to suburbs. A similar selectiveness seems to occur with respect to mental health. People who are 'difficult' or behave 'deviant' tend to be trusted out from rural communities to the city, whereas equally problematic city-dwellers mostly remain in the city.

There are no follow-up studies on life-satisfaction before and after move from rural to urban residence or vice-versa. Yet there are some cross-sectional studies that controlled factors indicative of social success, such as income, perceived social class, marital status and house-ownership. See once more [scheme 3](#). Again studies of that kind are available for rich western nations only.

Statistical control for social success changes the picture only slightly. The tendency to a negative effect of urban living is replaced by a tendency to a positive effect in Germany. We see a similar effect in Korea. In the USA the negative relationship is reduced. Still, both zero-order and multiple order correlations remain close to zero.

3 DISCUSSION

These findings imply that there is something wrong with the belief that rural life is more satisfying than the urban life. In poor developing countries the reverse is true. Rural living is least preferred, and both satisfaction with residence and satisfaction with life are lower in rural areas than in urban areas. In rich urbanized nations the belief is confirmed in that people tend to prefer rural living and express more satisfaction with residence in rural areas. However in western nations there is no difference in average satisfaction with life between rural and urban areas.

These findings raise at least three questions: Firstly, how can rural people in western nations be more satisfied with residences and still not be happier. Secondly, what is wrong with belief? Why are rural people not happier everywhere? Lastly, if the belief is wrong, why is it still believed?

3.1 Why more satisfied with residence in rural areas but not more satisfied with life?

Remember that this phenomenon occurs in rich nations only. In the poor parts of the world rural people are both less satisfied with their residence and with their life.

The divergence of evaluations in western nations can be understood from the difference in appraisal processes. If we evaluate a specific domain of life, such as our house or neighbourhood we tend to focus on the most visible attributes of that matter and compare it with some standard of ideal. This is a largely cognitive judgement, which is heavily influenced by social values and models. If we evaluate our life-as-a-whole, we rather infer how happy we are by how we feel usually. This is primarily an affective appraisal which draws more on bio-psychological needs than on social comparison. This view is discussed in more detail in Veenhoven (1992, 1995).

This means that an environment can be evaluated positively, because it meets current standards of ideal, while in fact people are not happy in it because it does not fit very well with their (unconscious) basic needs. This is known as 'false satisfaction'. Obviously, people will not express satisfaction with conditions in which they are deeply unhappy. However, in the case at hand here there is no salient happiness effect of residence context. By lack of such 'inner' referents the judgement of residence is largely based on 'outer' social norms of good dwelling. Such norms favour rural dwelling in western society.

Still another thing is that judgements of residence tend to focus on its surface aspects, such as the scenery and size of the garden. As such they do not cover rural life completely. The less visible parts of rural life, such as its hidden tensions and monotony, are probably less well reflected in appraisals of residence satisfaction.

In this context it is worth noticing that pro-rural (and anti-urban) attitudes are typically not put into practice. People stay in the city, but keep on dreaming about lost paradise in the country (Rao et. al. 1977). As such the pattern of residence satisfaction seems to reflect a collective dream rather than real evaluations. In other words: a largely 'symbolic' attitude.

3.2 Why is rural life not more satisfying?

There is some truth in the socio-biological assertion that evolution did not design us for city life. Yet it did not predispose us to rural life either. Current sedentary life in farms and villages is equally remote from the original hunter/gatherer life as urban life in streets and stockbuildings. Gipsy life is probably more close to the human proto pattern.

Even if rural life were closer to the life of our earliest ancestors, that would not necessarily make it more satisfying. The most prominent characteristic of human nature is adaptability. That quality enabled us to survive in quite different natural habitats. If humans can thrive in deserts

and in the Antarctic, they are also likely to adjust to the inconveniences of city life. Even if they do not like its crowding, noise and pollution and express dissatisfaction with city life, they can still be happy in it. As we have seen above, one can be happy in situations that are not ideal and unhappy in situations that are highly valued.

Still one can maintain that humans need close contacts and intimate support, and that rural 'Gemeinschaft' provides better social networks for that purpose than does urban 'Gesellschaft'. That claim has been inspected by Palisi (1983) in a study in three western nations. He found that 'most-urban people have no fewer relations than less-urban (sub-urban) people', but 'in fact many have more' (p. 527). Crider et. al. (1991) did observe somewhat more Gemeinschaft like pattern in rural Pennsylvania USA, (contacts, religion) but found that these matters did not affect happiness in the predicted way.

Possibly is still true that rural social networks are more stable through time, family-ties being stronger and divorce less common. Yet that does not mark the rural pattern more satisfying. The modern urban relational pattern (serial-monogamy and friendship by choice) has the advantage of providing a better psychological match. That advantage compensate its costs of search and uncertainty.

Much of the advantages attributed to rural residence are in fact advantages attributed to rural society. In fact, the belief in greater satisfaction of rural living draws heavily theories implying that modernisation makes society less livable. Such theories have a long tradition in sociology, and the disadvantages of modern society have been well documented. Yet it becomes increasingly clear that humans thrive currently better in modern societies than in traditional ones. In the modern societies people live longer and happier (Inkeles 1993, Veenhoven 1994). The greater livability of modern societies is only partly a result of their greater material affluence. Economic prosperity affects livability only at the lower levels of development. A lot of the difference is due to greater opportunities for self-direction in modern societies. Differentiation of roles in work and family, and increased freedom of choice created a greater diversity of lifestyle patterns. Increased self-awareness and sense of self-control made people more able to select lifestyles that suit their needs and capacities. As a result, the person-lifestyle fit² tends to be better in modern society. Its 'deviant' subcultures are not only a sources of anomy and disorganisation, but also provide socio-cultural 'niches' in which non-common people can thrive.

A last thing to note is that other indicators of global well-being do not indicate better livability of rural life either. Rural people are not healthier and do not live longer. In fact, physical health tends to be slightly worse in rural areas. In spite of notions about urban neurosis, mental health in generally not better in rural areas either. (Wit, 1986)

3.3 Why do we still believe rural life is more satisfying?

A first thing to note is that the belief in happy-country-life is most typical for advanced urbanized society. As we have seen in [scheme 1](#) the belief is less current in the parts of the world where the majority lives in the country (and is directly confronted with the miseries of backwardness and isolation). Let us therefore focus on the appeal of the belief in western nations. As we have seen rural life is currently about equally satisfying as urban life in western nations, but the (mostly urban) public nevertheless thinks that life on the country is better. This phenomenon can be explained in two ways: as a matter of misperception and as a cultural lag. These explanations do not exclude each other.

Perceptual bias

The subject matter is not very tangible: we cannot see average happiness in the country. The belief is based on a picture we 'construct' on the basis of scattered pieces of information. Like most social perceptions, our judgements are therefore very vulnerable for selectiveness and distortion.

Our source of bias is the stereotype of pastoral happiness. That stereotype is still in circulation. It filters our perceptions. Therefore, we tend to focus on the nice parts of rural life. These are also typically the most visible surface aspects, such as the scenery. These first rosy impressions are mostly not corrected by reality confrontations, because most western people simply see little of rural life.

A second source of perceptual bias is in the salience of urban malaise. Urban crowding and crime are well visible and often thematised in the media. The good sides of city life are less easily visible. We cannot see freedom. Hence we overestimate the black sides of urban life and miss several of its good sides.

Striking a balance of good and bad effects of urban or rural living is extremely difficult for an individual observer. In fact such balance judgements can be made only by scientific measurement of overall quality of life. For long, such measurements have not been made. Scientists that studied the matter focused on the salient black sides as well, and involved in quantifying urban problems.

Cultural lag?

Possibly the balance has been different in earlier times. One can imagine that the problems of urban life were greater in western nations at the peak of the urbanisation process. At that time cities had to absorb an ongoing stream of rural migrants, and were faced with crowding, pollution and social disorganisation.

It is also possible that the first generations of rural migrants had severe problems of adjusting to city life. City life - and in a broader sense modern life- requires specific psychological qualities. The variety of lifestyle alternatives can be used only if one knows what one wants and is able to choose. Such psychological qualities were often underdeveloped among rural migrants and remained underdeveloped in second generations due to inappropriate socialisation techniques. This may have resulted in much unhappiness in the first generations of migrants. A present day study in an urbanizing African country shows indeed that rural migrants in urban Sierra Leone are markedly less happy (Peil 1984). The pains of adjustment may have created a large audience for messages about the benefits of rural life.

All these problems seem to be largely overcome today. Still their echo can be heard in stereotypes of pastoral happiness and urban malaise.

Scheme 1

Preference for rural or urban residence around the world

Part of the world	Preferred type of residence			
	rural	small town (>10.000)	middle city (10 to 100.000)	big city (<100.000)
<i>poor world</i>				
Africa (South Sahara)	24%	20%	15%	41%
Asia (South East)	36%	9%	38%	15%
Latin America	33%	18%	24%	24%
<i>rich world</i>				
Australia	32%	20%	32%	16%
Anglo America	38%	20%	29%	13%
Western-Europe	32%	27%	22%	19%

Source: Angst 1978: 120

Scheme 2

Life-satisfaction in rural or urban residence
Some illustrative findings

Nation/Year	Average life-satisfaction (0-10)			
	rural	small town	big city	source
<i>poor nations</i>				
Brazil 1960	4.3	5.3	5.2	Cantril 1965: 365
India 1962	3.6	4.1	4.2	Cantril 1965: 368
Philippines 1962	4.8	5.3	5.2	Cantril 1965: 378-80
Sierra Leone 1981	7.0	7.1	7.6	Peil 1984: 366
<i>rich world</i>				
Austria 1984	4.9	5.3	5.0	Schultz et al 1985: 2.10
European Community 1981	6.8	6.8	6.6	Halman 1987: 369
Netherlands 1988	8.5	8.8	9.0	Algem 1988: table 3
USA 1964	6.1	6.1	5.8	Cantril 1971: 66
USA 1971	5.6	5.9	5.7	

Data: World Database of Happiness, Catalogue of Correlates, Subject category L 10 (Local environment). See: Veenhoven (1994)

Scheme 3

Life-satisfaction and rural-urban residence
Some illustrative elaborations

Nation/Year		zero-order correlation	control-variables	partial correlation	source
Germany	1978	$r = -.01$	age, sex	$\beta = +.06$	Veenhoven 1994
	1980	$r = -.05$	subjective class	$\beta = +.06$	
	1984	$r = -.05$	marital status	$\beta = +.09$	
	1988	$r = -.10$		$\beta = +.12$	
South Korea	1980	$r = +.04$	age, sex education, income marital status own house	$\beta = +.15$	Shin 1968 ³ : 367
USA	1974	$r = -.07$	age, sex, race education, income, occupation marital status, children	$r_{pc} = -.06$ (pooled years)	Palisi 1986:369-370
	1975	$r = -.16$			
	1977	$r = -.05$			
	1978	$r = -.09$			
	1982	$r = -.05$			

Scheme 4

Life-satisfaction and residence size

Some illustrative findings

Nation	residence size	satisfaction with life	source
Austria 1989	1. country 2. surrounding country 3. small cities (5 to 10.000) 4. middle cities (10 to 50.000) 5. big cities (> 50.000) 6. metropolis (Vienna)	% satisfied 65 69 65 78 66 67	Gehmacher 1989: 90
Germany 1988	1. country 2. rural village 3. village near city 4. small rural town 5. small industrial town 6. medium sized town, little industry 7. medium sized town, much industry 8. city suburb, much industry 9. big city, much industry	average 0-10 6.1 6.2 6.3 5.7 6.1 6.2 6.2 6.0 5.8	Wohlfahrtssurvey as reported in World Database of Happiness
USA 1971/1972	1. rural places (not in or near metropolitan areas) 2. rural places (in or near metropolitan areas) 3. small towns (2.500-10.000) 4. cities (10.000-50.000) 5. metropolis-inner city 6. metropolis other	average 0-10 5.3 5.6 5.7 5.3 4.6 5.3	Tweeten & Yao-Chi-Lu 1976:22

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Notes:

¹ The World Database of Happiness is free available on www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness

² This concept is analogous to the person-environment fit described by Carp & Carp (1984).

³ Table 3 in the article of Shin reports a slight positive correlation in the USA and a small negative correlation in Korea. Probably this is a mistake. Other reports on the same US study mention a negative correlation. Sign are reversed here.