

SATISFACTION AND SOCIAL POSITION: Within-nation-differences compared across nations

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of life-satisfaction in 10 European nations shows little difference in satisfaction between people of different age, gender, income and education. This is in line with results of earlier studies. This study shows that the non-difference cannot be attributed to measurement error. It also demonstrates that the non-difference is not specific to rich and egalitarian nations.

The observed non-differences in satisfaction within countries can be explained by three alternative theories: comparison-theory, folklore-theory and livability-theory. Yet in Chapter 15 we have seen that the sizeable differences in average level satisfaction across countries can be explained by livability theory only.

1 INTRODUCTION

Within countries there is little relationship between individual satisfaction and social position as measured by gender, age, income and education. This well-known pattern of non-difference remains after correction for measurement error. The pattern is quite similar across nations. The findings can be explained by three alternative theories of satisfaction. Interpretation in terms of liveability-theory suggests that these positional differences do not involve much variation in net quality of life in the societies at hand here. Social position is generally conceived in terms of differential life-chances; the higher the position, the better the chances. In that line of thought it is logical to expect a relationship with satisfaction. Better (objective) opportunities must materialise in greater (subjective) satisfaction. In western society, social position is commonly described by Income, Education, Age and Gender. The (relatively) rich are supposed to have better life-chances than the poor, and the well educated to be advantaged over the poorly educated. Likewise, the young are seen to have better chances than the old, and men to enjoy better conditions than women. Contrary to this view, individual satisfaction has been found unrelated to these social positions. As noted earlier, this disturbing finding raised doubts about the measures of satisfaction. One of the aims of this study is to check that explanation, by correcting for measurement error.

All studies in this project assessed these four social positional variables and all inspected relationships with subjective satisfaction. In part II we have already done some analyses in particular countries. Chapter 3 reported a detailed analysis in the Netherlands and Chapter 4 considered the matter in more detail for Belgium. In both instances we saw little relationship between objective social position and subjective

satisfaction. In this chapter we compare findings across countries. We will inspect whether this pattern of non-difference appears in other nations as well. Two further nations will be considered: Italy and Russia. The case of Italy is interesting, because traditional social distinctions seem to be more pronounced in that country than in Belgium and the Netherlands. The case of Russia is telling because new inequalities are likely to have greater impact on subjective evaluations; in particular the newly emerged split between poor and rich. As we wanted to analyse national samples we could not use all ten countries in this project.

2 INDIVIDUAL LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS IN FOUR COUNTRIES

Tables 1 to 4 present individual level relationships between satisfaction and social position in four countries: Belgium, Italy, The Netherlands and Russia. First three do main-satisfactions (Table 1 to 3), then overall life-satisfaction (Table 4). All satisfaction variables are scored on 0-10 scales. The correlations are corrected for measurement error. Though most correlations are significantly different from zero (all correlations greater than .06), the correlations tend to be low. In the countries considered here, satisfaction (with life and with the three domains) is hardly linked to gender, age, income and education.

2.1 Domain-satisfactions and social position

Three domain-satisfactions were assessed in this study: 1) satisfaction with one's housing, 2) satisfaction with one's financial situation and 3) satisfaction with one's social contacts. Satisfaction in these domains does not differ between males and females in these countries. There are some slight differences between young and old, though these are not the same in these countries. In these three domains, the rich tend to be slightly more satisfied than the poor, and the highly educated slightly less satisfied than the low-educated.

Satisfaction with housing

Table 1 shows that males and females tend to be equally satisfied with their housing situation in all countries. Housing satisfaction does differ with age however. The elderly are slightly less satisfied with housing in Italy, but somewhat more satisfied with housing in The Netherlands and Russia. In Italy, the rich are slightly more satisfied with housing than the poor. In The Netherlands and Russia income makes no difference. The best educated are slightly less satisfied with their housing conditions in all three nations.

Table 1.
Social position and satisfaction with housing. Three nations 1992, corrected correlations.

	gender	age	income	education
Italy	-.04	-.13	+.10	-.06
Netherlands	+.06	+.21	-.02	-.13
Russia	-.00	+.28	+.02	-.09

Satisfaction with finances

Table 2 shows a similar pattern of correlation with financial satisfaction. Again gender does not make a difference and once more we see that the elderly are more satisfied in The Netherlands and in Russia. The rich are slightly more satisfied with the financial situation in all three nation. Again the better educated tend to be less satisfied.

Table 2.

Social position and satisfaction with finances. Three nations 1992, corrected correlations.

	gender	age	income	education
Italy	-.04	+.00	+.20	-.01
Netherlands	+.01	+.21	+.12	-.07
Russia	-.00	+.19	+.10	-.05

Satisfaction with social contacts

Table 3 presents the correlations with satisfaction with social contacts. Again males and females are about equally satisfied in the three countries. The elderly tend to be less satisfied with their social contacts in Italy, but somewhat more satisfied in Russia. The rich are much more satisfied with social contacts in Italy, but no such difference appears in the other two nations. Again, the best educated tend to be somewhat less satisfied.

Table 3.
Social position and satisfaction with social contacts and. Three nations 1992,
corrected correlations.

	gender	age	income	education
Italy	-.04	-.14	+.34	-.18
Netherlands	+.08	-.04	-.06	-.08
Russia	+.04	+.06	-.02	-.08

2.2 Life-satisfaction and social position

Table 4 presents the correlations with life-satisfaction in four countries. Here we see that males and females are about equally happy in Belgium, The Netherlands and Russia. In Italy, females are slightly less happy than males. The elderly appear to be slightly happier in Belgium and Russia, but unhappier in Italy. The rich tend to be happier in all four countries. In Italy the rich are clearly at an advantage ($r=+.27$), but in the other countries the difference is small (Belgium, Netherlands) to none (Russia). Again education tends to relate negatively to satisfaction, especially in Italy.

The pattern of (non-)correlations with life-satisfaction is similar to most of the previously discussed correlations with domain-satisfactions. Yet one difference must be noted: In the Netherlands and in Russia the elderly appeared somewhat more satisfied with their housing situation (Table 1) and with their financial situation (Table 2). Yet on the whole they are not more satisfied with their life (Table 4).

Table 4.
Social position and satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. Three nations 1992, corrected
correlations.

	gender	age	income	education
Belgium	+.03	+.06	+.07	+.03
Italy	-.09	-.13	+.27	-.18
Netherlands	+.00	+.00	+.06	-.06
Russia	+.01	+.06	+.03	-.02

3 FIT WITH EARLIER RESEARCH

The corrected correlations presented here are in line with the results of earlier studies using correlations that were not corrected for measurement error (Veenhoven, 1994). As correlations are typically low, correction does not change things much.

Gender

Earlier studies on satisfaction have typically shown that males tend to be about as satisfied as females. As yet, that pattern of non-difference has appeared in all nations (Veenhoven, 1994: 721-756). Still, it is worth noting that females report more satisfaction with social contact. This fits the common view that females have better social skills. Another noteworthy point is that Italian females are somewhat more satisfied with life-as-a-whole than their male compatriots, which fits the view that Italy is a male dominated society.

Age

Pioneering American studies on satisfaction suggested that we get ever more satisfied with increasing age (Campbell et al 1976). We saw indeed that the elderly are more satisfied with their housing and with their financial situation in The Netherlands and Russia. Yet our data sets also show examples to the contrary. The elderly are more satisfied with their social contacts, and in Italy the elderly are systematically less satisfied with their life-as-a-whole. The results are noteworthy from an other point of view as well: Press reports stress the agonies of elderly Russians, who would suffer most under the turn of social-political system. Yet we see that the elderly are relatively satisfied in Russia (though not absolutely so!).

Income

Earlier studies on satisfaction observed modest relationships with income in developed nations (Veenhoven, 1994: 907-931). In these data we see a similar pattern. The rich tend to be somewhat more satisfied than the poor, in particular with their income, but the correlations tend to be small. The relationships between satisfaction and income are most pronounced in Italy. This may mean that Italy is the most unequal society in this sample. The correlations are smallest in Russia. Only the correlation with financial satisfaction differs from zero in that country. This finding is also at odds with recent press reports. If it is true that sharp income splits have emerged in Russia, we should have seen greater correlations, in particular with income-satisfaction. If many Russian came to live below the absolute poverty-line, the poor cannot be equally satisfied as the rich either.

Education

The observed negative relationships with education are in line with earlier research as well. In developed nations at least, the well educated tend to be slightly less satisfied (Veenhoven, 1994: 532-564). This phenomenon is commonly explained in terms of relative deprivation; the well educated expecting more than they get. That interpretation does not fit the fact that the correlations with financial satisfaction are least pronounced, and the correlations with social contacts most. Again Italy stands out by the highest correlations, now in the negative direction. If we keep to the interpretation that Italy is an unequal society, that may mean that diplomas are of little help in ascending the social ladder.

4 FIT WITH CURRENT THEORIES OF HAPPINESS

In Chapter 1 we discussed three theories of happiness: comparison-theory, folklore-theory and liveability theory. In Chapter 13 these theories were applied at the societal level. We will now consider them at the individual level.

4.1 Comparison theory

To bring back in mind: comparison theory of satisfaction assumes that we constantly compare life-as-it-is with notions of how life-could-be or should-be, and derive such standards from what we see in the lives of others and what we deem possible. The smaller the gap between reality and standard, the greater the satisfaction.

Predictions

At first sight, this theory would predict that social comparison will produce a strong relationship between satisfaction and social position. The better one's position is perceived to be relatively, the more satisfied one must be. As high income and good education are generally seen as 'better' than low income and poor education, the rich must be more satisfied than the poor, and the highly educated more satisfied than the low educated. Likewise, the position of males is typically seen as superior to the position of females, and the position of young and middle-aged people better than that of the elderly. Since these status differences tend to be most pronounced in traditional societies, this interpretation of comparison-theory predicts that the satisfaction advantage of the privileged will be greater in Southern Europe than in Northern Europe. This variant of comparison-theory also predicts stronger relationships with 'place in society' than with 'quality of society'. We are more inclined to compare with compatriots than to compare across borders, and differences nearby are perceived more accurately than differences at distance.

Yet in another interpretation comparison theory rather predicts that there will be little or no relation between satisfaction and position. This is when we assume that standards adjust to reality; for instance that material standards rise when we get richer, and that health standards are lowered when we get older. This latter interpretation (also referred to as 'cognitive adaption') was followed in Chapter 1, in the discussion of whether life satisfaction is relative. In this interpretation, reaching a better position will produce satisfaction, but not for long. Satisfaction will fade, and even turn into dissatisfaction when expectations rise. Positive and negative effects will balance in the long run, which produces a pattern of non-correlation in survey samples.

Fit

Clearly, the data do not fit the first interpretation of comparison theory. Satisfaction is not systematically higher in the most respected social positions. The correlations with income-position tend to be positive indeed, but are small and often not significant. There is almost no correlation with gender, and different correlations with age. The correlations with education are negative. Yet, the data do support the prediction that the relations hips will be more pronounced in Southern-Europe (Italy) than in Northern-Europe (Belgium, Netherlands). The prediction that satisfaction will differ more within nations than across nations is clearly defied by the data.

In Chapter 13 we have seen sizeable correlations at the nation level, whereas this chapter shows that there is hardly any relationship at the individual level. The interpretation of shifting standards fits the data better. Most correlations are negligible indeed. Still a problem with this interpretation is that some of the correlations are not

negligible, for instance the correlations between satisfactions and income in Italy. Still another problem is that this theory failed at the country level. Remember Chapter 13.

4.2 Folklore theory

Folklore theory sees satisfaction as a matter of standard outlook, rather than as a result of an evaluation. Current views determine how satisfied people are; not the quality of their society, nor their position in that society. At the individual level, this explanation is also referred to as (personality) trait theory.

Predictions

Consequently, folklore-theory predicts that satisfaction is unrelated to social position. If outlook on life is part of the national character, all citizens in a country will tend to be equally satisfied. In this view, satisfaction differences can exist only if social position is linked with subcultural variation in outlook.

Fit

The data fit this theory fairly well. There is indeed little relationship between satisfaction and social rank. Still this explanation runs into problems when we try to explain the slight correlations that do appear. What about the small positive correlation with income and the slight negative relationships with education? These correlations can be explained only by assuming differences in outlook on life between social categories in a country. One could imagine that the elderly have an other view on life than the young, but why should age-related outlook be different in Italy than in Russia?

A similar problem arises in accounting for the difference in direction of the relationships of satisfaction with income and with education. One can attribute an other outlook to the rich, but how then can the outlook among the well educated be diametrically different? Still another problem is that this theory failed at the country level. Remember Chapter 13.

4.3 Liveability-theory

This theory sees satisfaction as an affective appraisal of life. It assumed that people feel better the more living conditions fit their needs and capacities.

Predictions

This theory implied clear predictions about the relationship between satisfaction and quality of the country ¹ Yet its implications about the relation with social position within society are not that clear cut. At first sight, the theory would seem to imply that satisfaction must be higher at the top of the social ladder, than on its bottom, because living conditions are better in the top positions. This is true if life is really better at the top than at the bottom. If it is merely a matter of social prestige, the impact on satisfaction will be quite modest. Remember that social-comparison theory is about 'perceived' advantage, but liveability-theory is about 'actual' advantage. Actual quality-of-life can be worse at the top of the social ladder than below; for instance, because the stresses involved in status maintaining are greater than the

pleasures of prestige. Likewise, the quality-of-life of men is possibly not better than that of women on average. Though males may have more income, power and prestige, they are less well endowed with intimate contacts. The latter assets may be more important than the former.

Interpretation

In this light, the low correlations could mean that the social differences at hand here do not mark substantial differences in quality-of-life. In the case of gender, that would mean that males and females tend to enjoy equally good lives in the countries studied here. Though their lives are clearly different in many respects, the balance of pleasures and pains must be about the same. In this reasoning, the life of the elderly is apparently not always less rewarding than life of young people. Only in the case of Italy is the balance of effects slightly in the disadvantage of the elderly. Not in Russia and The Netherlands. This explanation suggests that the rich have only a slightly better life than the poor in these developed countries, though the balance of effects is not the same everywhere. In this context, the higher correlations in Italy could be explained by difference in gratification of human needs for respect (rather than comparison as such). When applied to education, this explanation would suggest that the most educated live slightly less well, possibly because the lifestyle of the learned does not meet all human needs sufficiently. The general point of this explanation is that high status does not necessarily involve a better life. If this interpretation is correct, the findings imply that present day European society is more equal than most sociologists assume. Possibly these social positional differences once involved major differences in life-chances, but they seem not to do so at present.

5 CONCLUSION

This analysis confirms the results of earlier studies. There is indeed little difference in satisfaction between people of different age, gender, income and education. This study shows that the non-difference cannot be attributed to measurement error. It also demonstrates that the non-difference is not specific to rich and egalitarian nations.

The observed non-differences in satisfaction within countries can be explained by all three alternative theories. Yet in Chapter 13 we have seen that the sizeable differences in average satisfaction across countries can be explained by liveability theory only.

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Note

- 1 Mind that similar variables mean different things at the individual level and at the country level. For instance: national income is not just an aggregate of personal income. Living in a rich country means typically that there are good collective facilities and that life is fairly safe. Having a relatively good income-position in such country, hardly adds to these assets. It merely means that one can buy a bigger car. The effects on satisfaction are clearly not the same. Likewise: living in a highly educated country means typically that the social climate is characterised by tolerance and democracy. Again, the personal level of education is of little consequence for the use of this collective capital. Personal education is of some consequence for the job one gets and slightly boost income changes. If of any consequence for satisfaction at all, these individual level effects are still of a different order.