CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN HAPPINESS
Cultural Bias or Societal Quality?

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Abstract

There are sizeable differences in happiness between countries. These differences are consistent across indicators and quite stable through time.

There is a little support for the view that these differences are due to "cultural bias". In test performed here do not suggest that a great part of the difference results from cultural differences in "language", "desirability bias", "response tendencies" or "familiarity" with the concept of happiness.

There is solid empirical support for the view that these differences result from the fact that some societies provide their citizens with better living conditions than others. The bulk of the variance in happiness can be explained by nation characteristics such as economic prosperity, social security, political freedom, and social equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is about differences in average happiness between countries. Happiness or life-satisfaction is the degree to which an individual evaluates the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole positively (Veenhoven, 1984, ch.2). This phenomenon can be measured by simply asking people. Provided that questions are clear and anonymity guaranteed responses appear reasonably valid (Validity research reviewed in Veenhoven 1984, ch.3). Questions on this matter are commonly used in quality-of-life surveys. A current item is: "Taking everything together, how happy would you say you are? Would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?"

1.1 Differences in happiness between countries

During die last decades such questions have figured in representative surveys in many different countries. Comparison of the responses reveals striking differences. Average happiness tends to be lower in developing countries than in rich industrialized nations and among the latter marked differences exist as well. In **Scheme 1** the responses to highly similar questions in representative surveys in 28 countries around 1980 are summarized.

The average happiness-level is highest in the Netherlands (2.48 on a 3-step scale) and lowest in

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India (1.43). This difference is half the possible range between 1 and 3!

Similar differences in happiness have been observed before: a.o. by Buchanan and Cantril (1963) and Inkeles (1960) in comparisons of industrialized countries, by Inglehart (1977) in his analysis of the Eurobarometer surveys, and by Cantril (1965) and Gallup (1976) in reports of their world surveys. These studies involved different indicators of happiness. The differences in happiness between countries appear quite stable through time. The rankorder of happiness observed in a comparison of eight Western nations in 1948 by Buchanan and Cantril (1953) is largely the same as that appeared in a world survey in 1975 (Gallup, 1976). Likewise, the rank order of happiness among the EC-countries has remained virtually unchanged between 1975 and 1985.

These persistent differences beg for an explanation. Explanations for this phenomenon move along a continuum between two extremes: One extreme is the view that response-differences between countries are essentially the result of "cultural bias". The other extreme is the viewpoint that the observed differences in happiness reflect real variation, in happiness and that this variation results from differences in the livability of societies.

1.2 Cultural bias explanation

The crux of this explanation is that something went wrong in measuring happiness. The differences in response to survey questions on the matter are seen to result from other things than actual variation in appreciation of life. It is for instance suggested that social desirability bias works out differently in nations, e.g. Americans are more inclined to present themselves favourably. Familiarity with the concept is also seen to distort the picture: citizens of non-western nations for instance are said to be less familiar with the concept of happiness and therefore more apt to response reservedly to questions on the matter. Such explanations have been proposed by Qstroot and Snyder (1981). Similar accounts have been provided for other differences in well-being between countries, in particular to differences in mental disorders (for a review see Murphy, 1982). Underlying assumptions are 1) that cultures are too unique to allow meaningful comparison by the same criterium, and 2) that happiness is a relative matter and therefore essentially the same in all countries.

Societal quality explanation

This explanation assumes that the differences in responses to questions about happiness do reflect real variation in appreciation of life. This variation is attributed to differences in "quality"' of society. Qualitative differences mentioned concern a.o. the provision of citizens with food and shelter, safety, adequate care for children, fit between socialized and required behaviours and opportunities for self-actualization. Accounts of this kind have been proposed by Inglehart (1977) and Veenhoven (1984, ch.6). This explanation has also been used in accounts of other differences in well-being, such as cross-nation differences in suicide, mental disorder, and drug abuse (see a.o. Narroll, 1982). Basic postulates are that 1) societies can be more or less effective in meeting human needs and 2) that ineffective need-gratification manifests in bad health, mental disturbance and subjective unhappiness.

1.3 Research question

This paper considers these two contrasting explanations in more detail and explores their

tenability. The question is whether they apply at all, and if so, what their relative explanatory power is.

Approach

Exploring the tenability of these two extreme views we followed a four-step procedure. The first step was a literature-search to identify the specific claims involved. Secondly, one or more testable predictions were derived from each of these claims. Thirdly, we went through the literature again: now in search for data that allowed a test of these predictions. As a last step, the predictions for which we found relevant data were tested.

This paper reports tests of six claims: four claims involved in the cultural bias explanation and two claims involved in the societal quality explanation.

2. TEST OF THE CULTURAL BIAS EXPLANATION

This explanation involves at least four different claims. The first is that *translation* plays us false: words like "happiness" and "satisfaction" have subtle different connotations in the various languages arid therefore measure different matters. A second claim is that responses are systematically distorted by *desirability* bias: in countries where happiness ranks high as a value, people are more inclined to overstate their appreciation of life. A third claim is that *response styles* distort the picture, in particular the tendency to present oneself as an average citizen that prevails in collectivistic cultures, which leads to lower scores. The fourth claim is that happiness is a typical *western concept.* Unfamiliarity with it in non-western cultures results in lower ratings on questions that use the concept.

2.1 Differences a matter of language?

According to this explanation differences in reported happiness between countries result from subtle variations in the meaning of key terms used in the questions in different languages. Translations are imprecise. If this is true we can expect the following: 1) The pattern of difference must vary with the keyword used. Countries that score high on a question that uses the word "happiness" are not more likely to score high on questions that refer to "satisfaction" with life or that invite to a "ladder rating". 2) In bi-lingual countries ratings of happiness must differ between linguistic categories. Ratings must in fact be more close to same-language populations abroad than the different-language compatriots.

The first prediction can be checked by comparing the happiness rank orders of countries that result from different survey items. For this purpose we use the Gallup/Kettering world survey which involved three questions on happiness. Questions and data are presented in **Scheme 2**.

It shows that the rank order of happiness is largely the same for all three questions. Though there are some differences, clear positive rank order correlations emerge. Rank order correlations may overemphasize slight differences between countries at a same level of happiness. Therefore we also computed product moment correlations. These are respectively +.75 (Cantril-ladder and Happy), +.79 (Happy and Satisfied), and +.88 (Cantril-ladder and Satisfied), correlations that are almost as high as the reliability-coefficients for each of these items. So there is no support for this prediction.

The second prediction can be tested on three cases: Belgium, Canada and Switzerland. In Belgium two languages are spoken: French and Dutch. These categories can be identified in the data of the Eurobarometer surveys which allow a specification of regions within the country. The scores can be compared with those of France and the Netherlands, which are also involved in the

Eurobarometer survey. In Canada French and English are spoken. Data on the level of happiness in these categories are available from Bhishen and Atkinson (1980). These scores can be compared with those of France and Britain from the Gallup/Kettering world survey (Gallup 1976). Finally, three languages are spoken in Switzerland: French, German and Italian. Exact data are not available, but Inglehart has reported on the case of Switzerland (Inglehart, 1977).

Scheme 3 shows slight support for the prediction in the case of Belgium. French speaking Belgians report some what less happiness than their Dutch speaking compatriots and this difference is in the same direction as the (much greater) difference between France and the Netherlands. As for Canada, the French speaking Canadians report themselves more satisfied with life than their English speaking counterparts, and all Canadians rank above the French and the English. So this case is contrary to the prediction.

Inglehart (1977) reports similar results in the case of Switzerland, the Swiss all expressing relatively high levels of satisfaction with life, ranking far above the Germans, French, and Italians, with whom they share their languages.

2.2 Differences a matter of social desirability bias?

Another potential source of bias is social desirability: cross-national differences in happiness could result from differences in moral appreciation of happiness. In countries where happiness is regarded as morally desirable people are apt to overreport their satisfaction with life, both for reasons of ego-defense and social presentation. This claim is often raised to discount the high level of happiness in the USA. If this is true we can expect the following:

1) Happiness must be higher in countries that rank hedonic values high than in countries that rank pleasure and satisfaction low in their value hierarchy.
2) The difference must be more pronounced in responses to questions that are most vulnerable to social desirability distortion: that implies a greater difference on the survey question about one's "general happiness" than on the Affect Balance Scale which is about positive and negative "feelings in the past few weeks". The latter indicator is less vulnerable for desirability distortion because it is less of a failure to have felt down lately than to admit one's life as a whole unsatisfactory. Past weeks' feelings are also more difficult to deny: defense mechanisms have a better chance in the less palpable evaluation of life as a whole.
3) The correlation between scores on the happiness item and on the ABS must be small in all countries, but particularly small in the suspiciously happy nations.

Test of the first prediction requires that we measure hedonic value orientation in countries. We constructed an indicator of that matter on the basis of survey data. The European Values Study involved many questions about value preferences. In an earlier analysis of these data Halman, Heunks, Moor, & Zanders, (1987) have distilled several "value dimensions" and have computed average scores on these dimensions for each of the ten countries involved in the study. Some of these value dimensions are indicative of moral appreciation of pleasure arid satisfaction. One of these dimensions is the tendency to approve of lust and pleasure as a guiding principle in matters of family, marriage, and sexuality. Halman et al. refer to this dimension as "egoism". A second dimension concerns enjoyment and comfort in the realm of work ethics. Halman et al. Refer to it as the "comfort/materialistic" dimension. We simply added both these factor scores for each country and regarded the sum as a proxy of general moral hedonism in the country. This

indicator of moral hedonism is crossed with the level of happiness in the country. Happiness ratings are not higher in the countries where hedonic values are most endorsed (r = +.03) For instance, the three least happy nations are resp. low, medium, and high on hedonic value orientation. Again the prediction is not supported.

Data about scores on survey questions about "happiness" as compared to scores on the Affect Balance Scale are also drawn from the European Values Study. **Scheme 4** shows a high correspondence between ratings on the general happiness item and scores on the Affect Balance Scale. Contrary to the prediction, happy countries are not exposed by a low average Affect Balance. The rank order correlation is +.76. The product moment correlation is equally high, +.78.

Responses to the general happiness question and the Affect Balance Scale are also highly correlated at the individual level. Contrary to the prediction the correlation is not smaller in the suspiciously happy United States (+.50) but in fact higher than in the case of the Philippines (+.24) (Source: Veenhoven, 1984, databook)

2.3 Differences due to response style?

In collectivistic societies such as Japan people tend to present themselves as average citizens. Therefore they tend to respond modestly and are inclined to choose the midpoint of the response scale. This leads to relatively low scores because happiness distributions are typically skewed to the positive (Iijima, 1982). In individualistic societies people rather define themselves in the difference with others or orient on internal cues. If this is true we can expect the following:

1)Average happiness must be lower in collectivistic countries than in individualistic ones.
2) The spread of individual happiness ratings must be smaller in collectivistic societies.
3) Happiness must be closer to the midpoint of the scale in collectivistic countries.

The first two predictions are again tested with data of the European Values Study. Collectivism/individualism of the country was measured by the pattern of responses to questions about value preferences. Acceptance of personal choice and rejectance of tradition was taken as a proxi for value-individualism. Again we used value dimensions as identified and measured by Halman. These are "permissiveness" in moral and religious matters, "permissiveness vs. traditional" orientation in marriage and family and the earlier used "comfort" dimensions in work ethics. Scores on those dimensions per country were summed.[1] This score of value-individualism per country was correlated with average happiness as assessed. The results are presented in a scattergram in **Scheme 5**.

Contrary to prediction there is a negative correlation between value individualism and happiness. As can be seen in **Scheme 5** the correlation is —.27.[2] Nor is there a greater spread of happiness in individualistic countries. In fact there is a tendency to a negative correlation. The correlation between value-individualism of the country and spread of happiness is —.46 (n.s.).[3] The last prediction was tested with data of the Gallup/Kettering world survey. The Cantril ladder rating of present life used in this study has a rather clear midpoint.

Inspection of the distributions shows that Iijima is right in that the Japanese tend to prefer the midpoint of the scale. Yet this does not seem to be a manifestation of a more general difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (data not shown).

2.4 Differences a matter of familiarity with the concept?

Happiness is a typical Western concept. Because people In non-western societies are less familiar with the concept they are more inclined to avoid extreme responses and tend to rate themselves safely in between. As argued in the foregoing paragraph this leads to a relatively low average score. If this would be true we can expect more "don't know" and "no answer" responses in non-western societies particularly on items in which the term "happiness" is used.

This prediction can be checked with data of the earlier mentioned Gallup/ Kettering world survey of 1975. This study involved representative samples of 5 parts of the world, and therefore allows a good distinction between the "western" and "non-western" world.

It also involved three happiness questions: 1) how "happy" one feels all together, 2) how "satisfied" one is with life, and 3) how one ranks one's present life on an 11-step scale ranging from best possible to worst possible (the so called "Cantril" ladder). Each of these rating scales involved a DK/NA response category. Data are presented in **Scheme 6**.

The prediction is generally refuted by the data.**Scheme 6** shows that the non-response to questions about the appreciation of life is on average low and not lower in Western nations than in non-western ones. Only Japan forms a major exception to the rule with a non-response of 12%. So this test does not provide us with a conclusive answer.

3. TESTS OF THE SOCIETAL QUALITY EXPLANATION

This explanation takes the observed differences in average happiness between countries for real. It claims that these differences do not stand by themselves, but are part of broader differences in well-being, which result from variation in "quality of society". In this context Veenhoven (1984, Ch.8) has argued that the nations where people rate themselves happier stand out by better "material living conditions" and more "political freedom". Likewise, Inglehart (1972) has suggested that inhabitants of the small West European countries are relatively happy because their "scale" allows a more livable society. A recent observation by Inkeles (1984) hints in the same direction. Inkeles observed that the happiest nations stand out by "liberal socialization values". Though a liberal upbringing is not necessary a "better" one, it can provide a better fit with the realities of present day individualistic society.

3.1 Do the differences stand by themselves?

The greater happiness in some countries is a manifestation of better living conditions which also reflect in other aspects of individual well-being, such as health and incidence of mental disturbances. If this is true we can expect the following:

1) In the countries where people report themselves happiest, life-expectancy is greatest.
2) In the countries where people report themselves happier the incidence of psychological distress is lower.

The first prediction was tested on the basis of a data-set described in more detail in the next paragraph. **Scheme 7** shows that happiness is strongly related to life-expectancy: r = +.50. So, happiness is not a mere subjective idea, but something that goes hand in hand with "objective" well-being. The second prediction can be tested with help of "anxiety" scores Lynn (1971)

computed for seventeen industrialized countries for which we also have happiness data. Lynn's scores are based on a common factor in rates of suicide, hospitalization for psychosis, alcoholism, and calorie intake which appeared quite closely linked to anxiety as assessed by questionnaires with university students. Lynns' anxiety factor can be interpreted as a measure of psychological distress in the population. There is a firm correlation with Lynn's index of psychological distress: r = — .57. The observed counter-occurrence of psychological distress and happiness again supports the thesis that happiness differences are factual differences and coincide with other societal characteristics.

3.2 Can differences be explained by country characteristics?

The differences in happiness between nations are due to the fact that nations differ in the quality of living conditions they provide to their citizens. If so, happiness must be higher in countries that provide better material conditions, more protection of human rights, more political stability, better security, etc. Together these country characteristics must explain the bulk of the difference in happiness between countries.

Scores on the relative performance of countries on such criteria are available from Estes' (1984) handbook on indicators of "Social Progress". These indicators are based on social and economic statistics as well as on a comparative analysis of laws and law-enforcement. Estes provides country scores on educational performance, health status, women status (equal rights), defense effort, economic prosperity, political participation, political stability, cultural diversity, habitability of the physical environment, overpopulation, and welfare effort. Together these scores build up in Estes' Index of Social Progress. The book covers a lot of countries: 28 of these are the countries mentioned in exhibit 1 for which we also have happiness data.

In an exploratory analysis we considered the relation between these country characteristics and happiness in this dataset. We also considered some further country characteristics such as the Real national income (RGDP) (Summers and Heston 1988, pp. 1-25), unemployment rates (UN 1986, pp. 87-90), income inequality (GINI-coefficients: George & Lawson 1980; Van Dam, Van Puyenbroek, & Verschuren, 1989), and government expenditures as a percentage of the gross national product (indicative of welfare level). The country scores that appeared most closely related to happiness are presented in **Scheme 8**.

As can be seen, happiness tends to be higher the better the country provides its citizens with material comfort, social security, education, health care, and political rights. Happiness is also higher in the relatively equal societies. These differences are not only a manifestation of wealth. After control for RGDP the correlations remain sizeable. Together these country characteristics explain 80 % of the variance in (average) happiness in the 28-nation set.

4. DISCUSSIONS

This exploration of the evidence for two explanations of differences in average happiness between nations provides only little support for the "cultural bias" explanation and solid support for the "societal quality" account. Does this close the issue? Not definitely. There may be more testable claims than we have spotted so far, and one can also imagine other tests than performed here. The tests we did perform do not say the last word either. Further on one can of course always claim that the correlations with country characteristics are a spurious result of an as yet

unidentified cultural confounder. Yet for the time being it is most reasonable to assume that the observed differences in happiness are real. This asks for a further exploration of the social qualities involved.

5. CONCLUSION

There are sizeable differences in happiness between countries. These differences are consistent across indicators and quite stable through time.

There is a little support for the view that these differences are due to "cultural bias". In test performed here do not suggest that a great part of the difference results from cultural differences in "language", "desirability bias", "response tendencies" or "familiarity" with the concept of happiness.

There is solid empirical support for the view that these differences result from the fact that some societies provide their citizens with better living conditions than others. The bulk of the variance in happiness can be explained by nation characteristics such as economic prosperity, social security, political freedom, and social equality.

Notes

1 Hofstede (1980: 156-158) has also constructed a measure of individualism of cultures.
However, his data are not quite representative (Hermes employees) and the work-related items in this index refer in fact to other matters (e.g. the item on good physical conditions has at its best a remote relation with (the absence of) individualism).

2. When happiness is measured with a question on life satisfaction the correlation is Zero (r = +.05, n.s.).

3. When happiness is measured with a question on life satisfaction the correlation is zero (r = +06, n.s.).

4. For a comparison of the level of economic prosperity of nations the gross notional product is not ideal: it does not account for differences in purchasing power, it does not include household economies, and finally, because of its value fluctuations the US-dollar is no longer a reliable international standard.
An indicator that does not have these drawbacks is the Real Cross Domestic Product, expressed in international dollars per head of the national population, purchasing power parities accounted for.

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Scheme 1.

Happiness in 28 countries 1975-1985.

Country	Mean	SD	Item*	Source
Australia	2.31	.58	1	Gallup 76
Austria	2.03	.81	2	Schulz 86
Belgium	2.40	.48	2	Eurobarometer 86
Brazil	2.18	.71	1	Gallup 76
Canada	2.32	.51	1	Gallup 76
Denmark	2.30	.42	2	Eurobarometer 86
Finland	1.95	.47	3	Euro Values Study 81
France	2.01	.54	2	Eurobarometer 86
W.Germany	2.02	.35	2	Eurobarometer86
Greece	1.61	.62	2	Eurobarometer86
India	1.43	.60	1	Gallup 76
Ireland	2.28	.58	2	Eurobarometer 86
Italy	1.74	.54	2	Eurobarometer 86
Japan	1.84	.55	1	Gallup 76
S.Korea	1.81	.61	4	ISSNU
Malaysia	2.02	.40	5	Gallup 76
Mexico	1.56	.71	1	Gallup 76
Netherlands	2.48	.42	2	Eurobarometer 86
Norway	2.21	.56	3	Euro Values Study 81
Philippines	2.00	.47	5	Gallup 76
Singapore	2.30	.51	6	Leisure Dev. Center 80
Spain	1.99	.54	2	Eurobarometer86
South Africa	2.09	.67	3	World Values Survey 81
Sweden	2.23	.52	3	Euro Values Study 81
Switzerland	2.17	.57	3	Euro Values Study 81
Thailand	2.01	.46	5	Gallup 76
United Kingdom	2.23	.61	2	Eurobarometer 86
U.S.A.	2 31	.59	1	Gallup 76
All	1.99	.51		

1) “Generally speaking, how happy would you say you are—would you say you are very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy?"
2) “Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days — would you say you are very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy ?“
3) “Taken all together, would you say you are — very happy, quite happy, not very happy, or not at all happy ?“ The item was recoded by us to a 3-point scale by combining the “not very

Scheme 1 continued

happy" and the "not at all happy".

4) "Taken all together (altogether), how would you say things are these days, —would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?"
5) "In general, how happy would you say you are — very happy, fairly happy, or not very happy?"
6) Responses to questions like:"How happy do you feel as you live now? Please choose one term from this card that is closest to your feeling — very happy, fairly happy, neither happy nor unhappy, fairly unhappy, or very unhappy".

The item was recoded to a 3-point scale by combining answer categories 1 and 2, and 4 and 5, respectively.

Scheme 2.
Happiness (single direct questions) rank order of nations of three survey questions.

Country	Happiness question		
	happy	satisfied	best/worst possible life
USA	1	3	2
Canada	2	4	3
UK	3	5	4
Australia	4	2	8
Benelux	5	9	9
Scandinavia	6	1	1
Brazil	7	7	6
France	8	10	10
W. Germany	9	6	5
Mexico	10	8	7
Japan	11	12	12
Italy	12	11	11
India	13	13	13

Source Gallup world survey 1976.

Scheme 3.

Average Happiness in bi-lingual nations compared.

Bi-lingual countries		Neighbouring countries	
Belgium			
— French speaking	3.23	France	2.88
— Dutch speaking	3.47	Holland	3.34
Canada			
— French speaking	8.89	France	7.60
— English speaking	8.62	UK	8.50

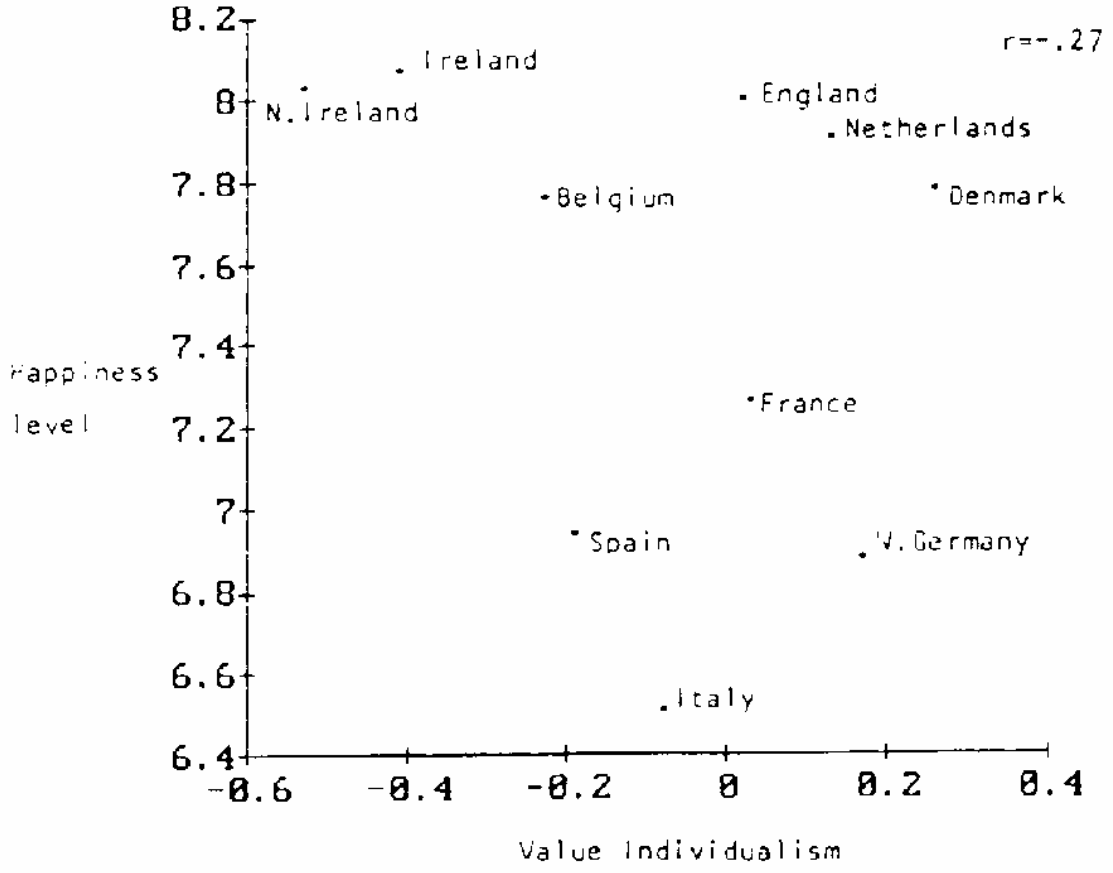
Scheme 4.

Responses to questions about "general happiness" (1-10) and "past week feelings" (-5 to +5) in 10 countries.

Country	General happiness		Past few weeks' feelings	
	mean	rank	mean	rank
Ireland	8.07	1	1.66	3
N.Ireland	8.03	2	1.86	2
England	8.00	3	1.41	6
Holland	7.91	4	1.51	4
Denmark	7.78	5	1.97	1
Belgium	7.76	6	1.43	5
France	7.26	7	1.01	8
Spain	6.94	8	0.79	10
W.Germany	6.88	9	1.39	7
Italy	6.51	10	0.86	9

Scheme 5

Happiness level and value individualism in 10 EC-countries (1980).



Source: European Value Survey, Halman et al. 1987.

Scheme 6

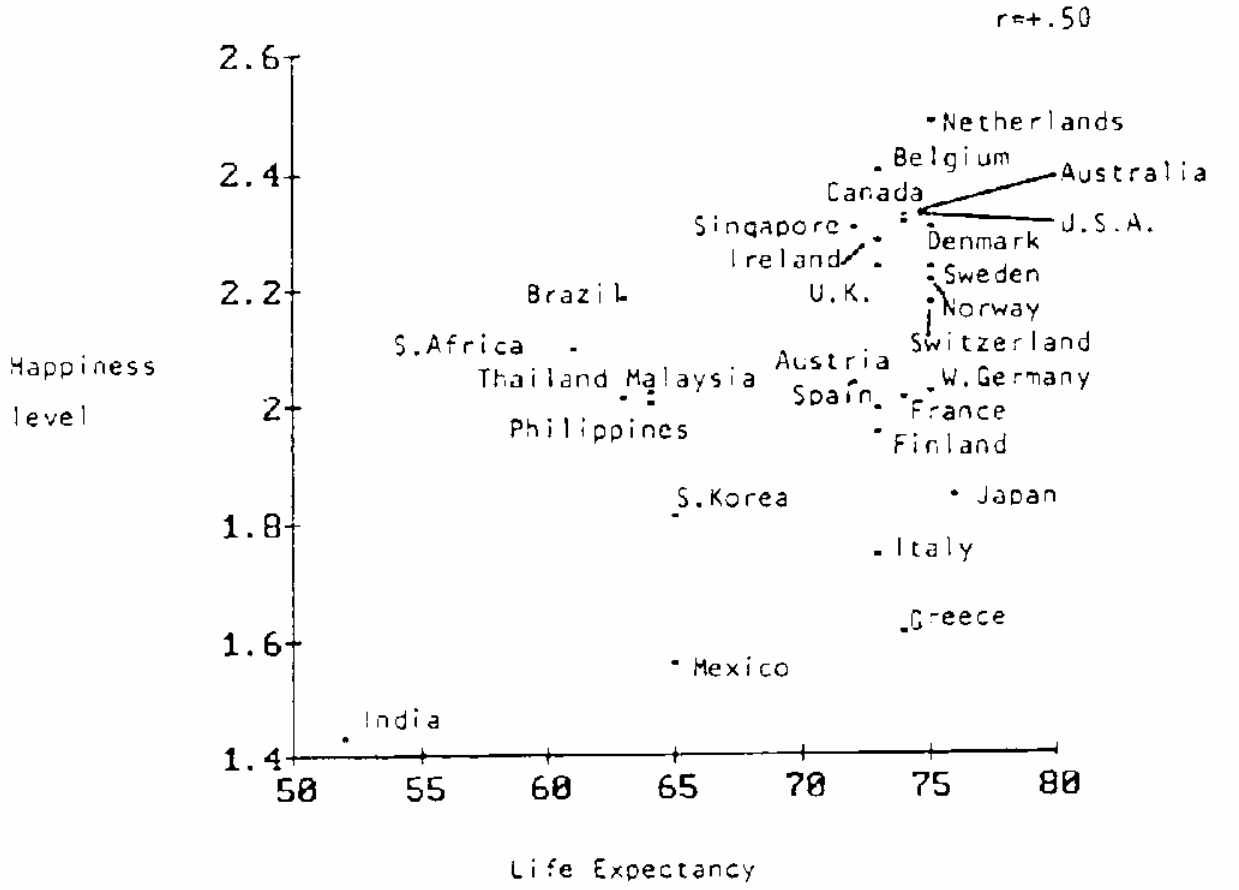
Non-response percentages to question about happiness in six parts of the world.

Part of the world	Question about happiness		
	happy	satisfied	ladder
Australia	0	1	0
Southern Africa	1	0	0
North America	2	1	1
Latin America	2	1	0
Far Fast	2	1	1
—Japan	12	0	0
—India	1	2	2
Western Europe	2	0	1

Source Gallup/Kettering world survey, 1975.

Scheme 7

Happiness level and life expectancy in 28 countries.



Source: Life Expectancy: National Account Statistics, U.N. 1982.

Scheme 8.

Happiness and country characteristics in 28 nations around 1979/1980.

Country characteristics	Correlation with happiness zero order	economic prosperity controlled
Education[1]	+.75	+.56
Health status[1]	+.59	+.25
Women's status[1]	+.56	+.71
Political participation[1]	+.45	+.37
Welfare state[2]	+.51	+.48
Economic Prosperity[3]	+.62	—
Unemployment %[4]	+.03	+.15
Income inequality[5]	—.40	—.70

1)Estes 1984, 2) *Government expenditures minus defense as % of GNP; 3) Real Cross Domestic Product: see note 4; 4) % unemployed of labour force; 5) CINI coefficient.*