HAPPINESS MEASURES

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1 SYNONYMS

Happiness item; Happiness scales; Indicators of happiness

2 DEFINITION

Assessment of how much people like the life they live.

3 DESCRIPTION

3.1 Concept of Happiness

The word "happiness" is used for different meanings, and these meanings all require different measures. This lemma is about happiness in the sense of subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole that is also called "life satisfaction."

Two "components" of happiness are distinguished within this concept: hedonic level of affect (the degree to which pleasant affect dominates) and contentment (perceived realization of wants). These components represent respectively "affective" and "cognitive" appraisals of life and are seen to figure as subtotals in the encompassing evaluation of life, called "overall" happiness.

3.2 Questions on Happiness

Thus defined, happiness is something that we have in mind, and things that are in our mind can be assessed using questioning. Questions on happiness can be presented in various ways:

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Direct Versus Indirect Questions

A common direct question is, "Taking all together, how happy would you say you are?" Indirect question rather taps related things, such as, "Do you think that you are happier than most people in this country" or "Do you often sing when in the shower?" An assumed advantage of indirect questioning is that this will reduce response bias. A disadvantage is that something other than happiness is measured.

Single Versus Multiple Questions

Rather than using single questions as in the example above, one can ask about the same thing using multiple questions. Series of questions on happiness are referred to as "scales," and the most often used questionnaire is Diener, Emmons, Griffin, and Larsen (1985) Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS).

An advantage of single questions is that it is clear what is being measured and hence that one can easily see whether that is happiness as subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole (face validity). A disadvantage is that the particular words used in the question may not be interpreted in the same way by all respondents. An advantage of multiple questions is that such differences in interpretation balance out, though the disadvantage is that the questions may not quite address the same thing, such as the last item in Diener's SWLS. This question is whether one would change anything if one could live ones life over again. The assumption is that happy people will live their life over again in the same way as before, yet happy people can also be open to live another sort of life, since the happy tend to be open for new experiences.

One Time Versus Multiple Moment

The above-mentioned single question calls for a global estimate of their happiness from the respondent, which may involve various biases (Kahneman, 1999). An alternative is to ask repeatedly how happy one feels at the moment and to compute an average. This is referred to as the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), a variant of which is the Day Recall Method (DRM). These methods can be used only to determine the affective component of happiness, referred to above as "hedonic level of affect."

Affect Balance Scales

Hedonic level of affect can also be measured indirectly by asking people about particular feelings in the recent past, such as how often they felt "cheerful" or "blue." The reported number of negative affects is then subtracted from the number of positive experiences. A common scale of that kind is Bradburn's (1969) 10-item "Affect Balance Scale." This technique fits well with Bentham's (1789) classic notion of happiness as "the sum of pleasures and pains."

3.3 Validity

Critics have suggested that responses to questions on happiness actually measure other phenomena. Rather than indicating how much the respondent enjoys life, answers will reflect the respondents' normative notions and desires.

No Notion

One of the misgivings is that most people have no opinion at all about their happiness. They will be more aware of how happy they are supposed to be and report that instead. Although this may happen incidentally, it does not appear to be the rule. Most people know quite well whether or not they enjoy life. Eight out of ten Americans think about this every week. Responses on questions about happiness tend to be prompt. Nonresponse on these items is low, both absolutely (±1 %) and relatively to other attitudinal questions. "Don't know" responses are also infrequent.

A related assertion is that respondents mix up how happy they actually are, with how happy other people think they are, given their situation. If so, people considered to be well-off will typically report they are very happy, and people regarded as disadvantaged should characterize themselves as unhappy. This pattern is observed sometimes, but it is not general. For instance, in the Netherlands, a good education is seen as a prerequisite for a good life, but the highly educated appears to be slightly less happy in comparison to their less educated counterparts.

Colored Answers

Another objection concerns the presence of systematic bias in responses. It is assumed that questions on happiness are interpreted correctly, but that responses are often false. People who are actually dissatisfied with their life will tend to answer that they are quite happy. Both ego defense and social desirability would cause such distortions.

This bias is seen to manifest in overreport of happiness; most people claim to be happy, and most perceive themselves as happier than average. Another indication of bias is seen in the finding that psychosomatic complaints are not uncommon among the happy; however, these findings allow other interpretations as well.

Firstly, the fact that more people say they are happy than unhappy does not imply overreporting of their happiness. It is quite possible that most people are truly happy.

Secondly, there are also good reasons why most people think that they are happier than average. One such reason is that most people are like critical scientists and think that unhappiness is the rule.

Thirdly, the occurrence of headaches and worries among the happy does not prove response distortion. Life can be a sore trial sometimes but still be satisfying on balance.

The proof of the pudding is in demonstrating the response distortion. Some clinical studies have tried to do so by comparing responses to single direct questions with ratings based on depth interviews and projective tests. The results generally do not differ from responses to single direct questions posed by an anonymous interviewer.

3.4 Reliability

Though single questions on happiness seem to measure what they are supposed to measure, they measure it rather imprecisely. When the same question is asked twice in an interview, responses are not always identical. Correlations are about +.70. Over a period of a week, test- retest reliability drops to circa +.60. Though responses seldom change from "happy" to "unhappy," switches from "very" to "fairly" are rather common. The difference between response options is often ambiguous. The respondent's notion about his/her happiness tends to be global. Thus, the choice for one answer-category or the next is sometimes haphazard.

Because choice is often arbitrary, subtle differences in interrogation can exert a considerable effect. Variations in the place where the interview is held, the characteristics of the interviewer, sequence of questions, and precise wording of the key item can tip the scale to one response or the other. Such effects can occur in different phases of the response process, during consideration of the answer and during the process of communicating the answer.

Bias in Appraisal

Though most people have an idea of how much they enjoy life, responding to questions on this matter involves more than just bringing up an earlier judgment from memory. For the most part, memory only indicates a range of happiness. Typically, the matter is reassessed in an instant judgment. This reappraisal may be limited to recent change: are there any reasons to be more or less happy than I used to be? But it can also involve quick reevaluation of life: what are my blessings and frustrations? In making such instant judgments, people use various heuristics. These mental simplifications are attended with specific errors. For instance the "availability" heuristic involves orientation on pieces of information that happen to be readily available. If the interviewer is in a wheelchair, the benefit of good health will be more salient. Respondents in good health will then rate their happiness somewhat higher, and the correlation of happiness ratings with health variables will be more pronounced. Several of these heuristic effects have been demonstrated by Schwarz and Strack (1991).

Bias in Response

Once a respondent has formed a private judgment, the next step is to communicate it; at this stage, reports can also be biased in various ways. One source of bias is inherent to semantics; respondents interpret words differently, and some interpretations may be emphasized by earlier questions. For example, questions on happiness are more likely to be interpreted as referring to "contentment" when preceded by questions on success in work, rather than items on mood. Another source of response bias is found in considerations of self-presentation and social desirability. Self-rating of happiness tends to be slightly higher in personal interviews than on anonymous questionnaires; however, direct contact with an interviewer does not always inflate happiness reports. Modest self-presentation is encouraged if the interviewer is in a wheelchair.

Much of these biases are random and balanced out in large samples. So in large samples, random error does not affect the accuracy of happiness averages. Yet it does affect correlations; random error "attenuates" correlations. Random error can be estimated using multiple-trait-multiple- method (MTMM) studies, and correlations can be corrected (disattenuated) on this basis. A first application on satisfaction measures is reported by Saris, Scherpenzeel, and Veenhoven (1996).

Some biases may be systematic, especially bias produced by technique of interrogation and sequence of questions. Bias of this kind does affect the reliability of the distributional data. In principle it does not affect correlations, unless the measure of the correlate is biased in the same way, i.e., correlated error. To some extent, systematic error can also be estimated and corrected. See also Saris et al. (1996).

3.5 Comparability Across Nations

Average happiness differs markedly across nations. Russians currently score 5.4 on a 0-10 scale, while in Canada the average is 7.7. Does this mean that Russians really take less pleasure in life? Several claims to the contrary have been advanced. Elsewhere I have checked these doubts (Veenhoven, 1993). The results of that inquiry are summarized below.

The first objection is that differences in *language* hinder comparison. Words like "happiness" and "satisfaction" will not have the same connotations in different tongues. Questions using such terms will therefore measure slightly different matters. I checked this hypothesis by comparing the rank orders produced by three kinds of questions on life satisfaction: a question about "happiness," a question about "satisfaction with life," and a question that invites respondents to give a rating between "best and worst possible life." The rank orders appeared to be almost identical. I also compared responses on questions on happiness and satisfaction in two bilingual countries and found no evidence for linguistic bias.

A second objection is that responses are differentially distorted by *desirability bias.* In countries where happiness ranks high in value, people will be more inclined to overstate their enjoyment of life. I inspected that claim by checking whether reported happiness is indeed higher in countries where hedonic values are most endorsed. This appeared not to be the case. As a second check, I looked at whether reports of general happiness deviated more from feelings in the past few weeks in these countries, the former measure being more vulnerable to desirability distortion than the latter. This also appeared not to be true.

A third claim is that *response styles* distort answers to questions about happiness dissimilarly in different countries. For instance, a collectivistic orientation in a country will discourage "very" happy responses because modest self-presentation is more appropriate within such a cultural context. I tested this hypothesis by comparing happiness in countries differing in value collectivism, but found no effect in the predicted direction. The hypothesis also failed several other tests.

A related claim is that happiness is typically a *Western concept.* Unfamiliarity with it in nonWestern nations would lead to lower scores. If so, we can expect more "don't know" and "no answer" responses in non-Western nations; however, this appears not to be the case.

The issue of *cultural bias* in the measurement of happiness must be distinguished from the question of *cultural influence* on appraisal of the quality of life. Russians can be truly less happy than Canadians but be so because of a gloomier outlook on life, rather than because they have an inferior quality of life.

3.6 Behavioral Observation

Hedonic level of affect can also be assessed using behavioral observation, such as frequency of smiling or body posture. These methods are used when self-reporting is not possible, such as when assessing babies' hedonic level or that of a deeply demented person.

3.7 Archive of Happiness Measures

Methods for assessing happiness are gathered in the collection "Measures of Happiness" of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2012a). This collection is limited to measures that fit the definition of happiness given above. Measures are classified by conceptual focus according to the distinction, mentioned above, between overall happiness (coded O), hedonic level of affect (coded A), and contentment (coded C). Additionally classifications include time frame, observation technique, and rating scale.

Each measure has a unique code: for instance, the above-mentioned Affect Balance Scale by Bradburn is coded A-AB-cm-mq-v-2-a (Affect | Affect Balance | currently, last month | multiple questions | verbal response scale | 2 response options | variant a). The collection contains a full description of the questions asked or observation schedules used and links to the results obtained using these measures in studies included in the finding collections of the World Database of Happiness.

The comparability of responses to different questions is enhanced in several ways, one of which is the transformation to scale 0-10 of average scores on the basis of weights obtained using the "scale interval study" (Veenhoven, 2009).

LITERATURE

A detailed overview of the literature is available in the Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2012b) section "Measurement of Happiness."

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