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UNSEEN HAPPINESS

Why sociologists fail to acknowledge findings on this matter

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on happiness have found that: a) most people are happy in modern nations, b) average happiness in nations is rising, c) inequality in happiness is going down, d) happiness depends heavily on the kind of society one live in, but e) not very much on one's place in society. These remarkable findings are largely ignored in sociology, if not denied. This has several reasons. One reason is in professional bias: most sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems are therefore not apt to see that people flourish nevertheless. Another reason is ideological: many of them are against the grain and can therefore hardly imagine that people thrive in imperfect society. Lastly, some sociological theories play them false, in particular cognitive theories implying that happiness is relative. These theories and the evidence against them are discussed.

1 FINDINGS ON HAPPINESS

Happiness has for long been a playground for speculative philosophy, but since the 1970s it became also a subject of empirical research. In this research, happiness is conceived as overall life-satisfaction and measured with self-reports. This conception has appeared to be sound and this way of measurement valid (Veenhoven, 1984, Diener 1999). This research tradition has yielded a growing body of knowledge much is which is gathered in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2006a). Four main findings stand out:

Most people are happy

The earliest investigations on happiness took place in modern western nations and observed that most people are happy. This appeared not only in responses to questions about life satisfaction, but also in various measures of daily mood, such as the affect balance scale.

An example is presented in figure 1. This is the distribution of responses to the following question in the World Values Survey 1999 in the USA

All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as-a-whole these days?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Dissatisfied satisfied

Only 13% of Americans rated 5 or lower on this question while no less than 61% rated their life 8 or higher. The reports may be somewhat inflated by desirability, but this bias appears to be marginal. The validity of these measures is beyond doubt. People understand the concept and answer such questions properly.

Figure 1 about here

Responses are not so positive in all countries of the world, but still the average is above neutral in most present day nations. This can be seen in figure 2, which presents the distribution of average scores in nations. Of the 90 nations in this comparison, only 18 score 5 or lower, while average happiness is 7 or higher in 26 nations

Figure 2 about here

Average happiness is rising

Since the 1970s happiness is periodically assessed in most western nations. Comparison over time shows an upward trend in most of these nations. See figure 3. Trend data on non-western nations are less abundant, but show greater gains in happiness over this period (Veenhoven, 2006b, table 2). Life-expectancy has also risen considerably in this era and that means that this generation witnessed an unprecedented rise in happy life years. Americans gained 5,2 happy life-years between 1973 and 2003 and West Europeans about 7 happy life years. We live now longer and happier than ever before in human history (Veenhoven 2005)

Figure 3 about here

Inequality in happiness going down

This rise in average happiness has been accompanied by a reduction of the dispersion of happiness in the general public, which manifests in a lowering of standard-deviations over time. This reduction is partly due to the rising average that causes a concentration of responses at the top of the scale, but not entirely. The lowering of inequality in happiness is also due to a reduction of unhappy responses.

Figure 4 about here

Strong impact of *kind of society*

Average happiness differs widely across nations (cf. Figure 2) and there appears to be a system in these differences. Happiness is systematically higher in nations that combine a good material standard of living with good governance, freedom and a climate of tolerance. See figure 5. Together, such societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in average happiness across nations.

There are also societal characteristics that appeared to be unrelated to average happiness of citizens. This is the case for income inequality in nations (Berg 2006) and for state welfare effort (Veenhoven 2000).

Figure 5 about here

Little impact of *place in society*

Several surveys on happiness were done in the context of marketing research for the welfare state that aimed at identifying client groups. Investigators expected social deprivation to be accompanied by unhappiness, which would legitimize policy intervention. Yet they found little correlation between happiness and income position and happiness appeared also unrelated to the level of education. Together, social positional variables explain at best 10% of the differences in happiness within nations. Happiness depends far more on embedding in intimate networks and on psychological characteristics. This is at least so in modern affluent nations.

2 RECEPTION IN SOCIOLOGY

There are good reasons to expect that these findings attract much attention in sociology. One reason is that the subject was on the agenda of the 19th century founding fathers of sociology such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer.

Another reason to expect greedy interest is that these findings involve answers to long-standing questions in sociology, the finding that most people are happy is indicative for the question of how livable modern society is, the finding that happiness is rising embodies an answer to the question of progress and the finding that happiness differs so much across kinds of societies is highly relevant in the debate of what a good society is like.

Still another reason to expect close attention is that some of the findings are in flat contradiction with common beliefs. The finding that inequality of happiness has

diminished during the last decades contradicts the common notion of ‘new inequality’ rising in modern societies. Likewise the finding that income inequality in nations is unrelated to average happiness contradicts the commonly held belief that socio-economic disparities hurt very much. The same is hold for the finding that income position within nations hardly affects happiness.

Yet the reality is that these findings are not acknowledged in sociology. This appears from the following:

Not mentioned in textbooks

The subject of happiness is typically absent in sociological textbooks. For instance the word does not appear in the subject index of the introductory books by Conclin, Giddens and Turner. These books do mention negative mental states such as anomie and alienation and do contain sections on (ill) health. A notable exception is the introduction into macro-sociology by Nolan and Lensky (2006) that discusses happiness in the context of social progress.

Negligible in sociological journals

The subject of happiness is only rarely addressed in sociological journals. This appears from an analysis of the sociological abstracts. Until the year 2000 the subject was hardly mentioned at all and today the number of publications on this subject is still below 1% of the total. The subject gets more attention in psychology and in economy. Publication trend are presented in figure 6.

Figure 6 about here

Marginal in sociological organizations

The subject of happiness is also marginal in sociological organizations. There is no research committee on this subject in the International Sociological Association and attempts to establish a research-committee in the related field of Social Indicators research have been unsuccessful as yet. Consequently, there has never been a symposium of happiness on a world congress of sociology.

Missing in sociological discourse on ‘quality of life’

Still, the term ‘quality-of-life’ is not unknown in sociology. There are symposia under that name and research institutes. Yet subjective enjoyment of life is typically not at stake in these contexts, quality-of-life being typically conceived as the degree to which life meet a-priory standards of wellbeing.

Lost in preoccupation with misery and inequality

Analysis of the sociological abstracts has shown an increasing use of negative words such as ‘fear’ and ‘crime’ (Elchardus 2005). This focus on misery contrasts with the above

mentioned findings of rising level of happiness in nations and declining dispersion of happiness.

3 REASONS FOR NEGLECT

Why do sociologists overlook this matter? I see three kinds of reasons: pragmatic, ideological and theoretical.

To begin with pragmatic reasons: sociologists are more interested in what people do than in how they feel. Their main objective is to explain social behavior and subjective wellbeing is at best a variable in that context. A related point is that sociology is about collectivities, while subjective wellbeing is an individual level concept. A further pragmatic reason is that sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems. So, if they look at subjective well being at all, they focus on ill being in the first place.

Next there are ideological reasons. Many sociologists are committed to notions of objective wellbeing, such as social equality and social cohesion. They are therefore not eager to investigate how people actually feel in such conditions, and when they do they often ignore contradictive results. When people appear to feel subjectively good in conditions deemed to be objectively bad, this is easily disposed of as 'desirability bias' or 'false consciousness'.

Lastly, there are theoretical reasons. Sociologists tend to think of subjective wellbeing as a mere idea that depends on social comparison with variable standards and that is therefore a whimsical state of mind, not worth pursuing and hence not worth studying. Below I will consider these views in more detail.

Implicit theories of happiness

Sociologists are not specialized in matters of the mind, but still make psychological assumptions. They typically borrow from cognitive psychology, which fits with their view on man as socially determined. In this line, sociologists see happiness as a cognitive 'construct' shaped by collective notions of the good life and as the result of comparisons, social comparison in particular.

Presumed social construction of happiness

Social construction theory is about how we make sense of things. It assumes that we 'construct' mental representations, using collective notions as building blocks. Social constructionism stresses human thinking and is blind for affective experience and innate drives.

In this view, subjective wellbeing is also a social construction, and as such comparable to notions like 'beauty' and 'fairness'. A common reasoning in this line is that subjective wellbeing depends on shared notions about life and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals.

One of the ways this is presumed to work is seeing the glass half full or half empty, optimistic cultures tending to highlight the positive aspects of life, while pessimistic cultures emphasize its shortcomings. Americans have been mentioned as an example of the former view and the French of the latter, e.g. by Ostroot & Scheider (1985). In that line Inglehart (1990:30) suggests that happiness is lower in France than in the US because life was harder in France for earlier generations, and this is echoed in a more pessimistic outlook on life today.

Another cognitive mechanism supposed to be involved is comparison with shared notions of the good life. In this view, subjective wellbeing is the gap between perceptions of life-as-it-is with notions of how-life-should-be. In this line it is commonly argued that the advertisement industry reduces our wellbeing, because it fosters dreams of a life that is out of reach for the common man. Another example of this view is the claim that subjective wellbeing can be bought with resignation.

An additional mechanism that has been mentioned is that we see ourselves typically through the eyes of others and hence also our subjective wellbeing. In this view, subjective wellbeing is a 'reflected appraisal'. We would be positive about our life when people around us deem us to be well off and negative when others see us as a loser. In this vein the lower happiness among singles has been explained as the result of a negative stereotype: because singles are 'labeled' as pitiful they come to see themselves as miserable, in spite of the apparent advantages of single living (e.g. Davies & Strong 1977).

The constructionist view implies that there is little value to subjective wellbeing, subjective wellbeing being a mere idea. Since notions about the good life vary across time and culture, subjective wellbeing is also seen to be culturally relative. A life that is deemed perfect in one idea of the good life may be seen as a failure from another point of view. For this reason this theory is popular among the critics of the utilitarian moral philosophy, i.e. that we should aim at greater happiness for a greater number; it reduces happiness to something insignificant.

Theoretical plausibility

It is beyond doubt that shared notions frame much of our appraisals, yet this is not to say that all awareness is socially constructed. We need no shared notions to experience pain or hunger; culture at best modifies our reflection on these experiences a bit. Our understanding draws also on external stimuli and on inner signals. The question is thus how this works in the case of subjective wellbeing.

The answer to that question depends on the definition of subjective wellbeing. If SWB is defined as the mere belief that one's life fits the common standards for a good life, social construction is evidently involved. However, if the definition of SWB also involves affective experience this is not so evident. In this volume we follow Ed Diener's definition of subjective wellbeing and that definition involves a preponderance of positive affect over negative affect.

Affect and cognition are linked, but they are certainly not the same. Evaluations of life draw on both sources of information and affective appraisals dominate. When striking the balance of their life, people appear to use their mood as the prime source of information (Schwartz & Strack 1991) and consequently overall happiness correlates typically stronger with hedonic level of affect than with contentment (WDH section H 6). There is logic in this, since the affect system is evolutionary older and serves to ascertain that the organism's basic needs are met. The cognitive system developed on top of this in homo sapiens, but it did not replace the affective system. It is rather an additional device that allows better learning from experience and planning of activities. In that light it is unlikely that subjective wellbeing is mere cognition.

Empirical support

The reality value of this view cannot be tested as such, because the human mind is still a black box. Yet we can check its aptness indirectly, when we consider implications of the theory that subjective wellbeing is a mere social construction.

Culture specific? One implication is that conditions for subjective wellbeing will be variable across cultures. If subjective wellbeing is a culture specific construct, its determinants will also be culturally specific. Hence empirical studies on correlates of subjective wellbeing must will considerable cultural variation and hardly any universal pattern. Yet the available data show otherwise. Comparison of average SWB across nations reveals a common pattern. Subjective wellbeing is systematically higher in nations that provide a decent material standard of living, that are politically democratic and well governed and where the cultural climate is characterized by trust and tolerance. Together objective societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in subjective wellbeing across nation (Veenhoven & Kalmijn 2005). Comparison of correlations within nations also shows much similarity. In all countries, the married appear to be happier than singles (Diener, 2000) and health is also a strong correlate of happiness all over the world, both physical health and mental health (WDH sections P 6 and M 7). Likewise, the differences in happiness across age and gender are typically small everywhere (WDH section A 4 and G 1)

Variable over time? A second implication is that subjective wellbeing must be variable across time. If subjective wellbeing depends on shared notions of the good life, it will vary with fads about that matter and this must reflect in erratic movements in average subjective wellbeing in nations, comparable to changes in political preference and tastes for music. Yet again this not what the data show. Average SWB appears to be very stable over time, at least in western nations over the last 30 years, where happiness rose slightly without many fluctuations (Veenhoven 2006c). Follow-up studies at the individual level also show considerable constancy over time (Erhardt et. al. 2000).

Inconsequential? A third implication is that subjective wellbeing is of little consequence. If subjective wellbeing is sheer cognitive spin, based on fashionable ideas, it will not matter much whether it pans out positively or negatively. Subjective wellbeing is then a petty appraisal, such as a person's preference for one kind of wallpaper or another; nice in itself but of no consequence for anything more than that.

Once more, this appears not to be the case. Subjective wellbeing appears to go hand in hand with objective thriving and follow-up studies have shown that subjective wellbeing is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity (e.g. Danner et. al 2000)

Together, these findings do not support the theory that subjective wellbeing is a mere making of the mind.

Note that these findings concern subjective wellbeing-as-such and not opinions about what adds to subjective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing-as-such is something that we experience ourselves and which we can appraise without the help of others. Though we know *how* we feel, we often do not know *why* and in attributing grounds for our wellbeing we draw more on a shared view. In this respect subjective wellbeing is comparable to a headache: a headache-as-such is not a social construction, it is an autonomous signal from the body. Yet our interpretations of what gives us a headache depend very much on hearsay.

Wellbeing as surpassing the Jones

All sociologists learned in their student days about the exemplary case of 'relative deprivation' described in Stouffer's (1949) classic study 'The American Soldier'. One of the things assessed in this study is the satisfaction with promotion chances and contrary to expectation the satisfaction with this aspect of army life appeared to be higher in units where promotion chances were low, such as the military police, than in units where promotion chances were high, such as the air force. This phenomenon was explained in terms of social comparison; because promotion was more common in the air force, air force personnel more often felt to be entitled to promotion. This case of satisfaction with promotion makes many sociologists think that all satisfaction depends on social comparison.

Social comparison theory is a variant of a wider comparison theory that links up with the above mentioned notion that subjective wellbeing is the difference between life-as-it-is and how-life-should-be. The smaller these discrepancies are, the higher the subjective wellbeing is assumed to be. In this theory there can be multiple discrepancies; among other things discrepancies between what one has and what one thinks that one could have, and discrepancies between what one has and what one feels entitled to (Michalos 1985). Perceptions of what one could have and what would be fair to have are seen to be drawn on social comparison. In this view, subjective wellbeing is a matter of keeping up with the Jones's; we feel well if we do better and bad if we do worse.

In this theory there is little hope for achieving greater happiness for a greater number, since improving the living conditions for all will also improve the life of the Jones's, leaving the relative differences what they are. Social comparison is one of the mechanisms in the idea that we are on a 'hedonic treadmill' that presumably nullifies all progress (Brickman & Campbell 1971) and it is the main mechanism in Easterlin's (1974) theory that economic growth does not add to subjective wellbeing. In this view we can at best mitigate the effects of social comparison somewhat if we make the differences less visible. In this line Frank (1999) has advised that conspicuous consumption should be discouraged with heavy taxes on luxury goods and Layard (2005) recommends taxing high incomes more. Limiting advertisement is also suggested in this context, in particular commercials that use pictures of a life that is out of reach for the common man.

Theoretical plausibility

There are several problems with this psychological theory. First of all it is clear that social comparison does not apply to all subjective appraisals. When I hit my finger with a hammer, I feel pain and my finger does not hurt less if neighbor Jones does the same. When appraising our situation, we use various sources of information, and social comparison is only one of these.

This brings us to the question of what value social comparison could be for assessing how well one lives. Obviously, that value limits to aspects of life where social comparison is possible, such as your income, but not to less visible aspects such your sex life or the pleasure you take from watching the sunset. Even where we can measure up to with the Jones comparison is possible it informs us evidently about what is *possible* in life, but not necessarily about what is *desirable* or *enjoyable*. Looking over the fence of my neighbor I can see that I lag behind in the number of beer cans emptied, but this does not tell me whether I would be better off if I drank more. Advocates of social comparison theory would retort that we compare only on things that are socially valued in society, such as money and fame, and this links up with the assumption that notions of the good life are socially constructed. Yet even if beer boozing were highly valued in my society, and if I wholeheartedly supported that value, I would end up less well if I drank more than my dipsomaniacal neighbor. That is evident because drinking too much is bad for the body, irrespective of how I think about this. This example illustrates a major flaw in comparison theory: it forgets that we are biological organisms.

Obviously we cannot feel well if our body is harmed. Affective alarms start ringing when we do not get enough food or when our temperature falls too low. Less obvious, but no less existent are psychological needs, such as the need to belong and to use and develop our potentials. We feel lousy when lonely and bored when unchallenged. Human are not born as a tabula rasa, on which socialization imprints culture specific wants, we are pre-wired to need some things and as a result feel good when these needs are met.

In this respect we are very much like our fellow animals. Dogs and cats can also feel good or bad and evidently do not calculate their subjective wellbeing by comparing shared standards of the good life. Evolution has simply programmed them to feel good or bad subjectively in situations that are good or bad for their survival objectively. Our affective system is not much different from that of dogs and cats, and also serves to make us do intuitively what is good for us. Human cognition has developed on top of this affective program and allows us to reflect on affective signals and even to ignore them to some extent. Yet this is not to say that cognition has replaced affective experience. Without affective information we are cognitively blind; we cannot choose and cannot come up to an overall judgment Damasio (1994)

I have discussed this alternative ‘need theory’ⁱ of happiness elsewhere (Veenhoven 1995, 2000) and Ed Diener has reviewed the strong and weak points of this view (Diener et. al. 2000). Though alien to mainstream sociology, this latter view on subjective wellbeing would fit socio-biology; to my knowledge this field of sociology has not yet considered the issue.

Fit with facts

Social comparison is at best one piece of information in appraisals of subjective wellbeing and it is an empirical question how much it matters. We can see how much when considering some implications of the theory.

One testable implication of social comparison theory is that people will typically be neither positive nor negative about their life. If we feel good because we do better than the Jones, the Jones must feel bad because they do worse. This must manifest in an average around neutral in general population samples. Yet survey data do not support this prediction, average subjective wellbeing being far above neutral in modern nations.

Another implication is that subjective wellbeing must be higher among people who do well on socially valued standards. This is not always the case however. Though people in high status jobs are typically happier than people in low status occupations (WDH section O 1), there is no correlation between subjective wellbeing and level of education (WDH section E 1). Likewise, there is only modest correlation between subjective wellbeing and income and this correlation is at least partly due to an effect of the former on the latter, happiness adding to earning chances (WDH section I 1). However, hand subjective wellbeing does appear to depend on things that have little to do with social comparison, as we will see below.

4 CONCLUSION

Happiness is a neglected subject in sociology. The main reason seems to be in common sociological theories that block a proper view on the matter

Figure 1
Life-satisfaction in the USA 1999

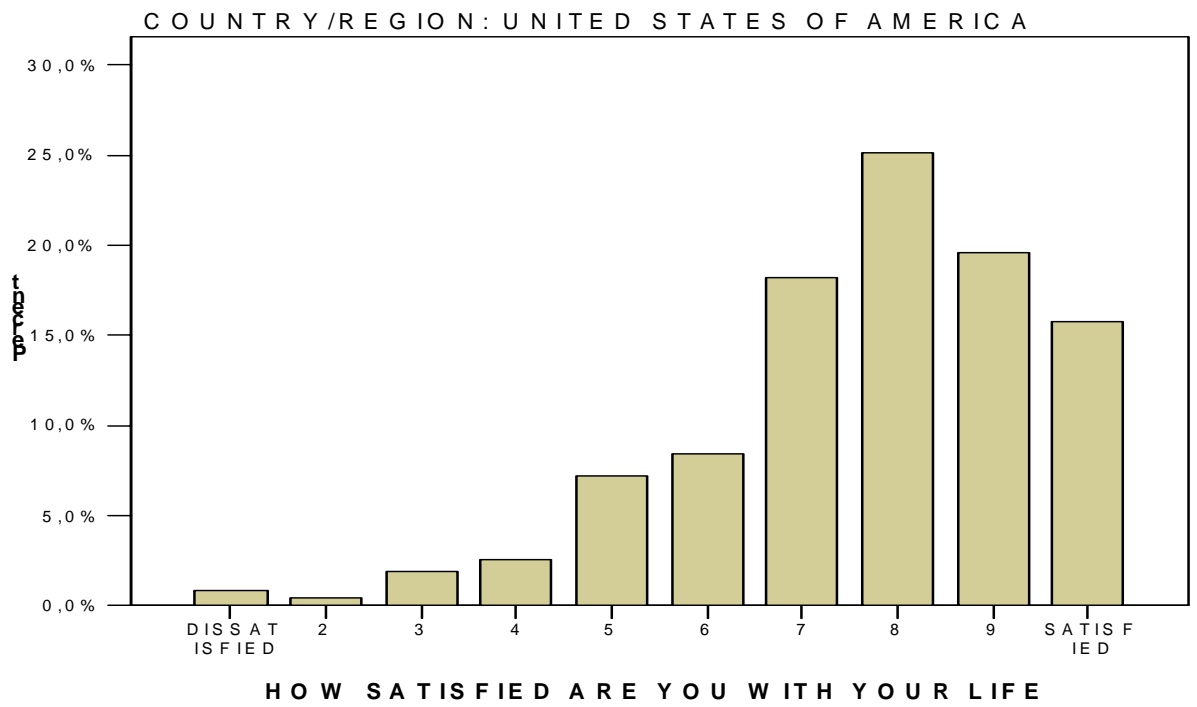


Figure 2
Average happiness in 90 nations 2000

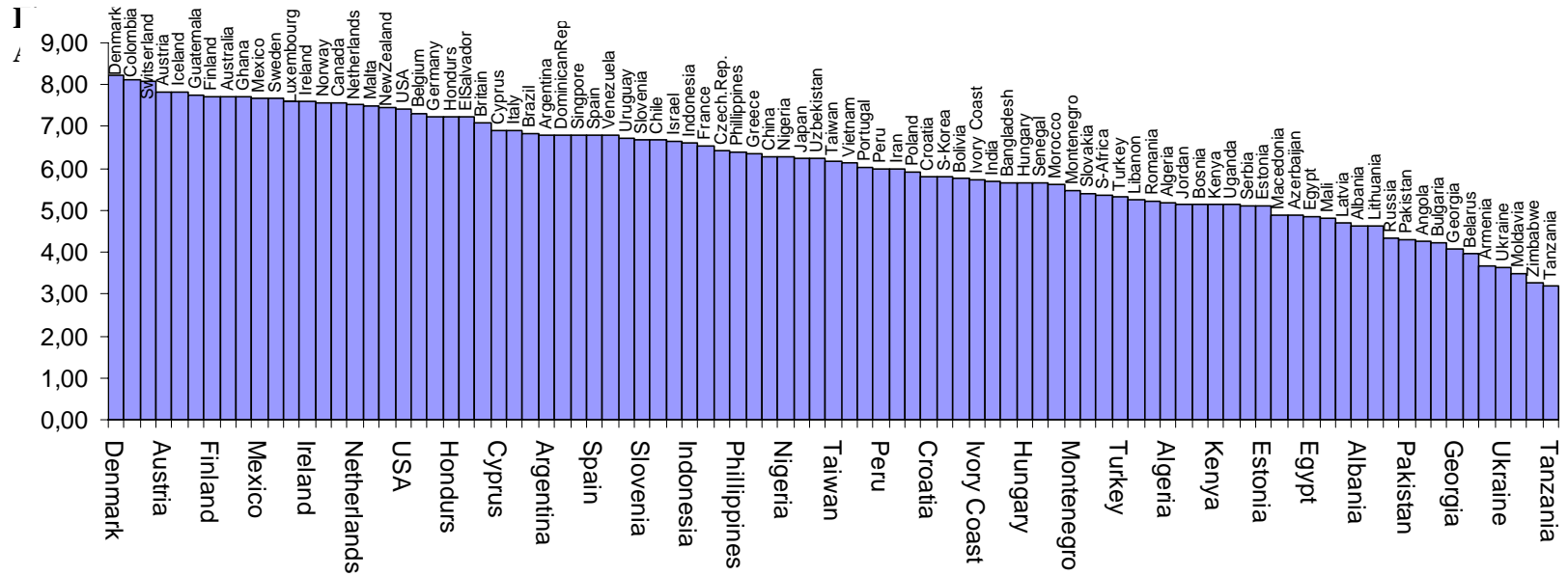
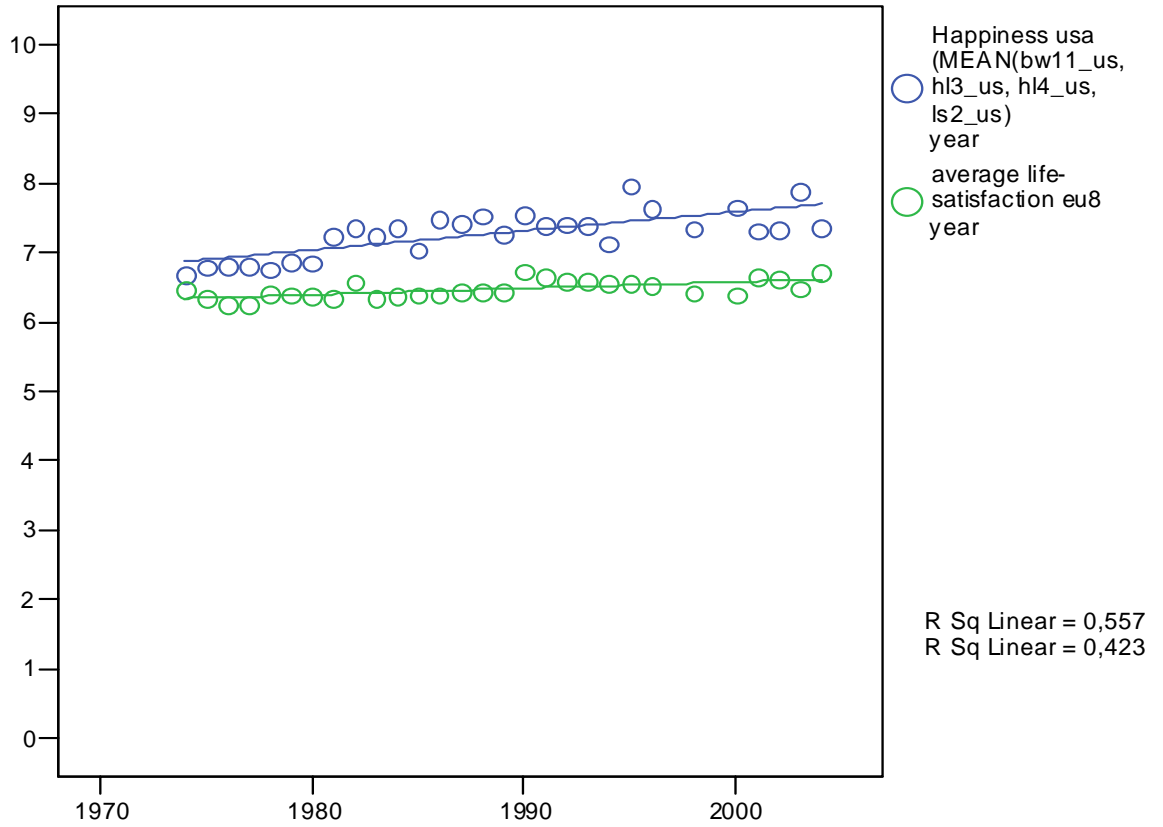


Figure 3
Trend average happiness in 8 EU nations and the USA, 1973-2003



Data: World Database of Happiness

Figure 4
Trend inequality of happiness in 8 EU nations and the USA, 1973-2003

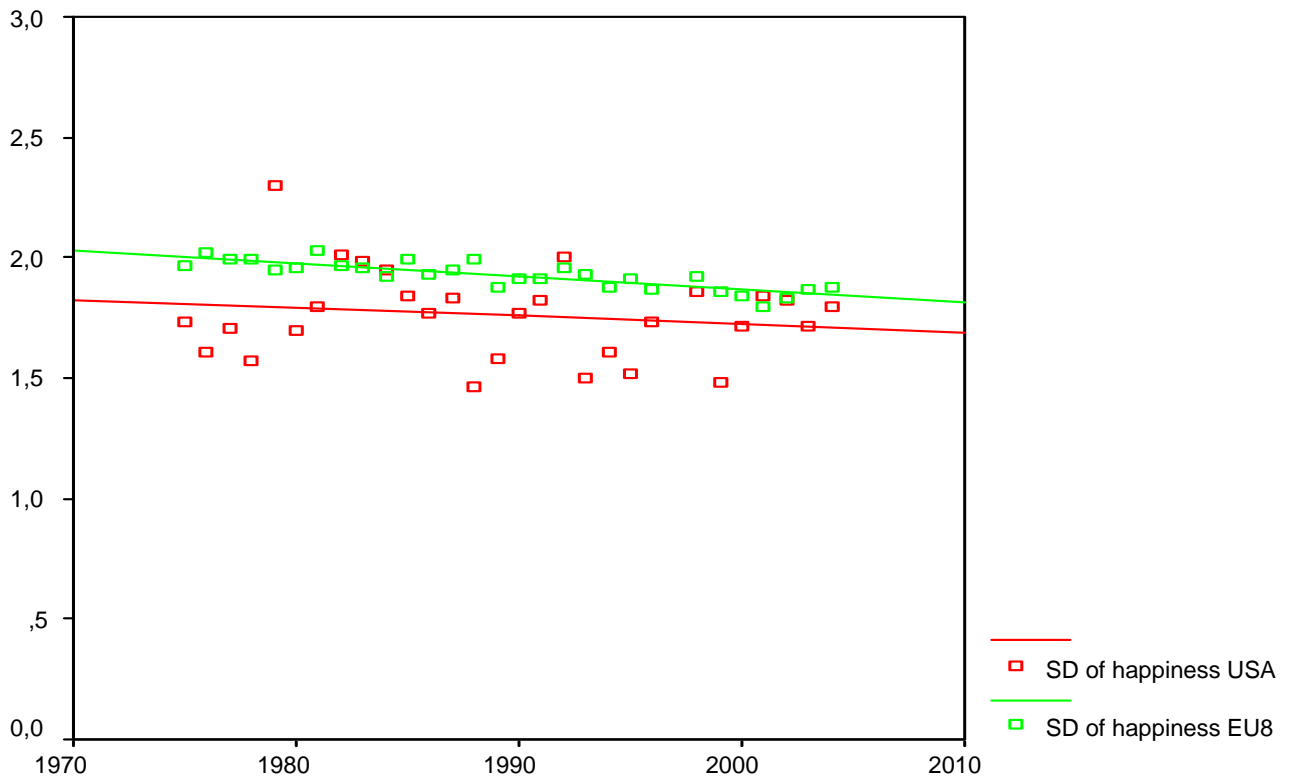


Figure 5
Average happiness and modernity in nations in 2000

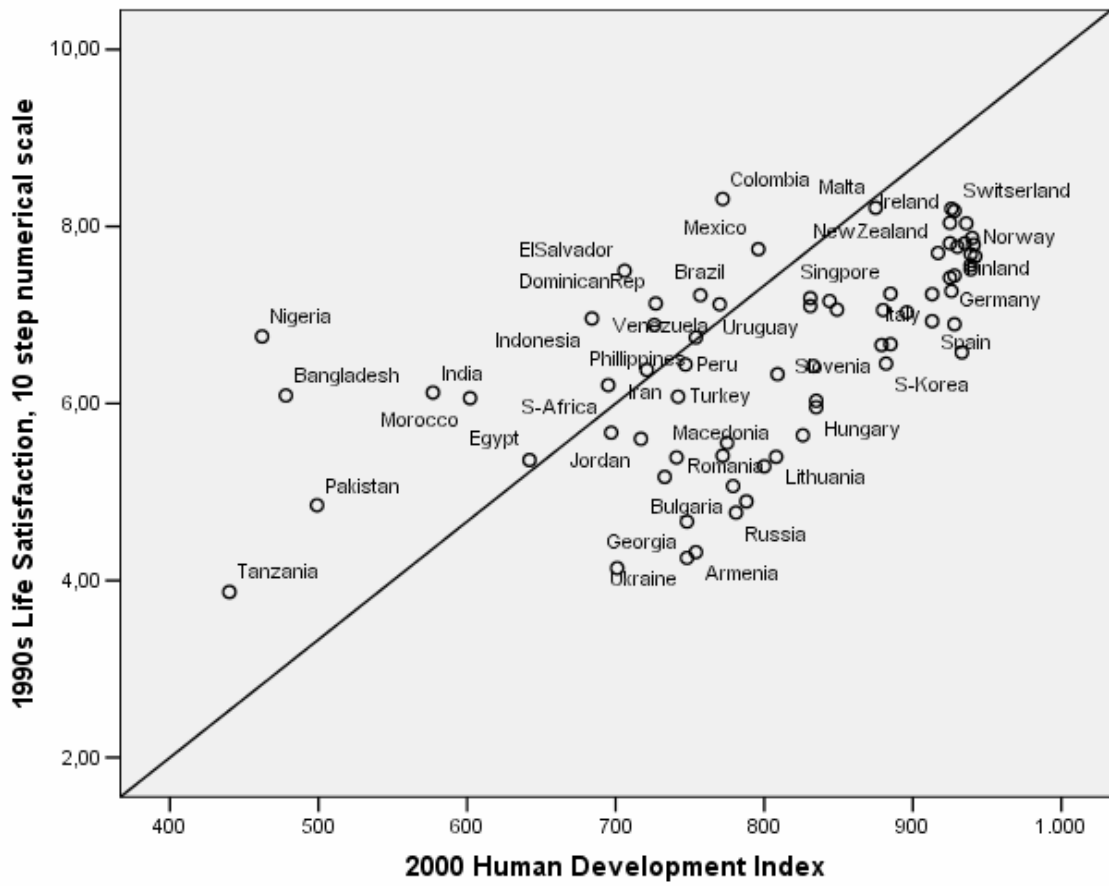
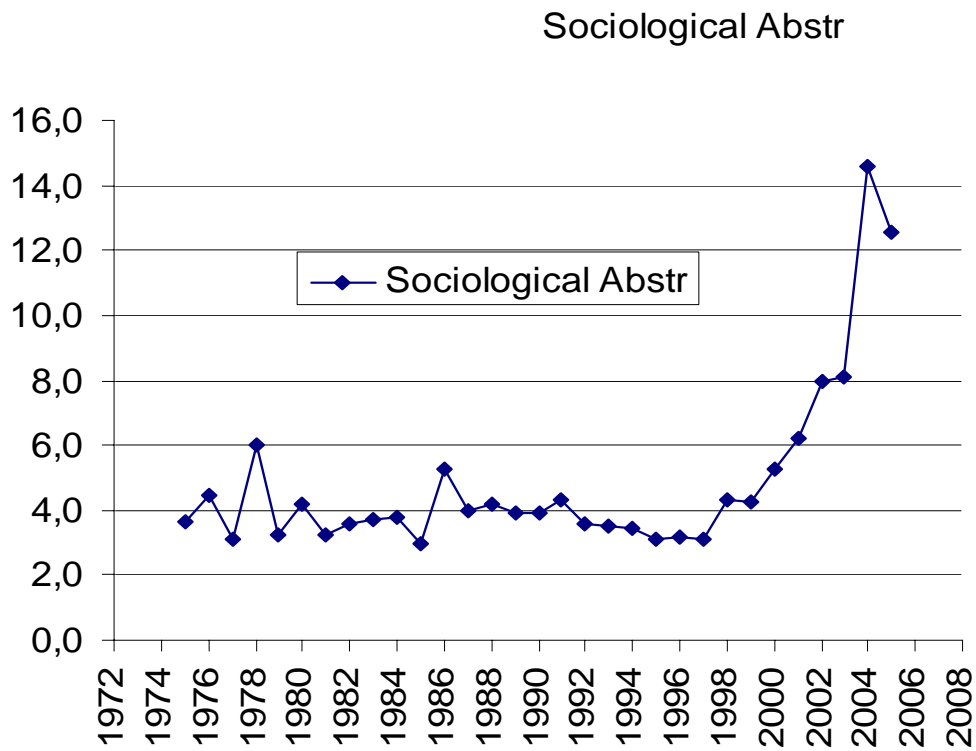


Figure 6
Use of terms 'Happiness' or 'life-satisfaction' in Sociological Abstracts
In promiles



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ⁱ Need theory of happiness is also named 'livability theory' and in this case the emphasis is on the conditions that allow need gratification