Greater Happiness for a greater number
Is that possible? If so, how?

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Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Presentation at conference
Well-being in the welfare state
House of Science, Helsinki, Finland
September 22 2011
Greater happiness

• The greatest happiness principle

• What we know about happiness

• Is greater happiness possible?

• How can that be achieved?
Greatest happiness principle

• Philosophy

• History

• Present day policy relevance
Greatest happiness principle

Philosophy

- Morally good is what works out well
  Morality appears in consequences

- Most moral is what produces
  ‘greatest happiness for greatest number’

- Called ‘utilitarianism’
Ideology of greater happiness
Moral philosophy

Variants

• Applied on individual choice
  *Actor utilitarianism*

• Applied on public choice
  *Rule utilitarianism* or *Political utilitarianism*
Ideology of greater happiness
Moral philosophy

Variants

• Applied on individual choice
  Actor utilitarianism

• Applied on public choice
  Rule utilitarianism or Political utilitarianism
Greatest happiness principle

**History**

- Idea roots in 18th century Enlightenment

- Articulated by Jeremy Bentham ‘On morals and legislation’ (1789)

- Rejected by leading ideologies in the 19th and early 20th century
  - Church
  - Liberalism
  - Socialism
  - Nationalism
Ideology of greater happiness

Present day relevance

• End of great ideologies of deficit
  Call for ‘positive’ policy goals

• Rising appreciation of happiness
  - In public opinion
  - Among policy makers

• Greater knowledge about happiness
What we know about happiness

- What is ‘happiness’?
- How is that measured?
- How happy are we?
- In what conditions are we most happy?
What is ‘happiness’?
Four qualities of life

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What is ‘happiness’?
Four kinds of satisfaction

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<td>Whole</td>
<td>Top experience</td>
<td>Life satisfaction (Happiness)</td>
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What we know about happiness
Measurement of happiness
Measurement of happiness

Best practice in direct questioning

- global self estimate
  - single question
  - multiple questions

- multi-moment average
  - for small scale follow-up
Measurement of happiness
Best practice in direct questioning

- global self estimate
  - single question for large scale surveys
  - multiple questions

- multi-moment average for small scale follow-up
Measurement of happiness

Example of a survey question

Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Dissatisfied  Satisfied
What we know about happiness

How happy are we?
How happy are we?
Denmark
How happy are we?
Zimbabwe 2005
How happy are we?

Finland
How happy are we?

Happiness in nations 2000-2009

- Denmark 8,3
- Finland 7,9
- USA 7,4
- Germany 7,1
- France 6,6
- Russia 5,5
- Iraq 4,7
- Zimbabwe 3,0
HAPPINESS IN 148 NATIONS 2000-2009

People enjoy their life-as-a-whole on scale 0 to 10
What we know about happiness
What makes us happy?
What makes us happy?

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Analogous concepts in biology

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What makes us happy?
Wealth of the nation
What makes us happy?
Inequality of incomes in the nation
What makes us happy?
Rule of law
What makes us happy?

**Societal conditions**

- Economic affluence  
  $+.65$
- Good governance  
  $+.62$
- Rule of law  
  $+.58$
- Democracy  
  $+.50$
- Personal freedom  
  $+.46$
- State welfare  
  $+.22$
- Income **inequality**  
  $+.18$

*Explained variance*  
75%
What makes us happy?

Societal conditions

- Economic affluence +.65
- Good governance +.62
- Rule of law +.58
- Democracy +.50
- Personal freedom +.46
- State welfare +.22
- Income inequality +.18

Explained variance 75%
Change social security by change happiness 1990-2005

1990-2005 Change public expense on social security in % GDP (ILO definition)
What makes us happy?

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What makes us happy?

Sources of difference in modern nations

- Heredity ± 30%
- Good/bad luck ± 10%
- Social position ± 10%
- Learned abilities 25%?
- Choice 25%?
Great happiness possible?

**Theoretical answers**

- **Comparison theory**
  - Happiness will oscillate
  - Around neutral level
  
- **Need theory**
  - Freudian theory of primitive urges
  - Maslow’s theory
Great happiness possible?

_Empirical answers_

- Most people are happy
- Most people live long and happy
How happy are we?

Happiness in nations 2000-2009

- Denmark 8,3
- Finland 7,9
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- France 6,6
- Russia 5,5
- Iraq 4,7
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Greater happiness possible?

• Theoretical answers

• Empirical answers
Greater happiness possible?

Theoretical answers

- Trait theory  
  no

- Comparison theory  
  no

- Need theory  
  yes
Greater happiness possible?
Average happiness 1973-2010
Greater happiness possible?

**Gains on scale 0-10, 1973-2010**

- Italy + 0,63
- Denmark + 0,55
- USA + 0,29
- France + 0,55
- UK + 0,26
- Netherlands + 0,26
- Japan + 0,20
- Belgium − 0,33
How create greater happiness?

• Improving livability of society
• Improving individual life-ability
### What makes us happy?

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How create greater happiness?

**Improve livability of society**

- Society as-a-whole  
  *macro level*

- Institutions in society  
  *meso level*  
  - Schools  
  - Work organizations  
  - Old age homes
How create greater happiness?

More livable society

**Do** invest in:
- Good governance
- Rule of law
- Freedom

**Don’t** invest in more
- Income equality
- State welfare
- Economic growth?
How create greater happiness?

More livable institutions

• Happiness is a major aim of
  – Schools
  – Care homes

• As yet no measurement of happiness effects

• Hence, no competition on happiness
What makes us happy?

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How create greater happiness?

**Strengthen life-abilities of individuals**

**Do** invest in:
- (preventive) mental health care
- Support of life choices

**Don’t** invest in
- More schooling?
How create greater happiness?

**Strengthen life-abilities of individuals**

**Do** invest in:
- (preventive) mental health care
- Support of life choices

**Don’t** invest in
- More schooling
How create greater happiness?  
Better informed life choice

Problem

• Happiness depends partly on choice: 25%?

• Difficult to predict our own happiness  
  Gilbert: ‘Stumbling on happiness’

• Hence much sub-optimal choice  
  Kahneman: Expected vs experienced utility  
  Frey: Mis-predicting utility
How create greater happiness?
Better informed life choice

Solution 1: Mood monitoring

• Use of happiness diary for education

• Feedback on
  – How happy you are compared to comparable people
  – Profile of your enjoyment of activities
How create greater happiness?

Better informed life choice

Solution 2: Chart consequences of choice

- Investigate long-term effects on happiness
  - of major choices
  - in large scale panels

- Assess probabilities for people like you

- Analogous to
  - tests of consumer goods
  - Research on health consequences of behavior
Comparative Happiness Indicator

Are you happier than other people? The Happiness Indicator answers this question, including if you could be happier than you are now.

Happiness Diary

People derive happiness from daily life... 'Will offer you a better understanding of your own happiness, which is vital in identifying the lifestyle that suits you best.

News

This website is currently under construction. Over time, important research findings based on the Happiness Indicator project will be placed here.

Log in or register

Click on 'Register' if you want to create a new user profile. If you already have a user profile, enter your email address and password and then click 'Log in'.

Email: 
Password: 
Forgot your password? 
Log in
Conclusion

• Greater happiness is possible

• This can be achieved at three levels
  - macro level of society
  - meso level of organizations
  - micro level of individuals

• Effect-research is required at all three levels
World Database of Happiness

http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl