ARE SOME PLACES HAPPIER THAN OTHERS

THE METRICS OF HAPPINESS

STORY BY GLENN RIFKIN
It’s time to pay attention to the quest for happiness. What was once dismissed as a search for psychological gold at the end of a rainbow has now become serious. In an increasingly troubled and chaotic world, entire nations are beginning to embrace the idea that human happiness and well-being are more important than money in creating a desirable and sustainable future. And this is what Ruut Veenhoven has been saying for the past four decades.
Veenhoven, now a professor emeritus at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, spent his college years in the Netherlands studying sociology in the 1960s. During that turbulent era, social upheaval around the world — including riots, campus unrest and labor strikes — created a fascinating petri dish for Veenhoven, who was particularly interested in what made for a good society. The debate centered on wealth and well-being, ambiguous concepts that pitted liberal and conservative thinkers against one another.

In this maelstrom of new thinking, Veenhoven decided that a good society was one in which people live long and happy lives. He defined happiness as the subjective enjoyment of life, the self-reported sense of well-being and satisfaction. He wondered: How happy were people in places like Russia and Cuba, the countries from which his increasingly leftist fellow students believed a new society would emerge? At home in Holland, a country with plenty of wealth but not enough well-being, Veenhoven was intrigued by the root causes of happiness and its impact on society.

In the Middle Ages, he noted, it was widely believed that happiness was not possible in earthly life after man had been expelled from the Garden of Eden. The basis of morality was the word of God. Over the next centuries and into the Enlightenment, the idea began to emerge that happiness and morality might co-exist for the greater good.

Veenhoven looked to 18th-century British
philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, the founder of modern utilitarianism, who advocated for individual and economic freedom, the separation of church and state, freedom of expression, the abolition of slavery and the elimination of the death penalty. Bentham argued that the moral quality of action should be judged by its consequences in terms of human happiness. He suggested that society should aim at "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," a principle that was well-known but seldom put into practice.

His interest now triggered, Veenhoven wrote a paper on the social conditions of human happiness that was published in a sociology journal and gained him significant attention. Skeptics in the sociology department scoffed at the notion that happiness could ever be measured or tested by science, but Veenhoven was undaunted. Thus began an academic career that led to, among other things, the creation of the field of positive psychology by such luminaries as Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania and Ed Diener at the University of Illinois. In 1984, for his doctoral dissertation, Veenhoven published his book, *Conditions of Happiness*, which became the basis for the World Database of Happiness, a collection of happiness research from around the globe that Veenhoven continues to oversee from the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization.

Veenhoven acknowledges the debates within the field about the definition of terms such as "well-being," "thriving" and "flourishing." He is aware that Seligman has disavowed the word "happiness" because he believes it connotes little more than a cheerful mood. Seligman said he focuses on "well-being" because it is a construct that can be measured. Nonetheless, Veenhoven believes his definition offers a valuable basis for considering the impact of happiness not just in the abstract but in the creation of public and economic policy. A "confusion of tongues" about the...
word “happiness” doesn’t mean that no “substantive meaning can be defined,” he wrote.

“I focus on the particular kind of subjective well-being, which is the enjoyment of your life as a whole,” he explained. And with his World Database of Happiness, he believes that happiness can be gauged through the aggregation of hundreds of life satisfaction surveys that measure this subjective point of view.

During the past decade, surveys have begun to measure how entire countries stack up on a happiness scale. These surveys have offered some surprising results, including the fact that the U.S., among the world’s richest nations, doesn’t crack the top 10 happiest countries on any of the lists.

On one key point, Veenhoven and Seligman agree. “You can theoretically enjoy life while living much happier than its income suggests. What these places have in abundance that other places lack gives us clues about what well-being really is.”

Seligman believes that gross domestic product should no longer be the only measure for how well a nation is doing, a notion made official in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan.

In 1972, when Bhutan’s Dragon King Jigme Singye Wangchuck signaled a desire and commitment to build an economy based not on gross national product (gross domestic product plus net income from a nation’s assets abroad) but on “gross national happiness” and the Buddhist spiritual values inherent in Bhutan’s culture, some cynics snickered. But they are not laughing anymore.

Bhutan’s GNH index, which became official in 2008 with the adoption of the country’s new consti-

in very bad conditions,” Veenhoven said. Indeed, this theory is borne out by the increasing awareness of the paradoxes yielded by the global surveys about life satisfaction and happiness.

“When life satisfaction is plotted against income, some very instructive anomalies appear — anomalies that give us hints about what the good life is beyond income,” Seligman writes in his 2011 book Flourish. “Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and the other Latin American countries are a lot happier than they should be, given their low gross domestic product. The entire ex-Communist bloc is much unhappier than it should be, given its GDP... What these places have in abundance that other places lack gives us clues about what well-being really is.”

—MARTIN SELIGMAN

in very bad conditions,” Veenhoven said. Indeed, this theory is borne out by the increasing awareness of the paradoxes yielded by the global surveys about life satisfaction and happiness.

“When life satisfaction is plotted against income, some very instructive anomalies appear — anomalies that give us hints about what the good life is beyond income,” Seligman writes in his 2011 book Flourish. “Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and the other Latin American countries are a lot happier than they should be, given their low gross domestic product. The entire ex-Communist bloc is much unhappier than it should be, given its GDP. Denmark, Switzerland and Iceland, near the top in income, are even happier than their high GDP warrants. Poor people in Calcutta are much happier than poor people in San Diego. Utah is tuition, is a multidimensional measure aimed at orienting the citizens and the nation toward happiness, primarily by improving the conditions of “not-yet-happy” people, as the government pointed out. Government policy is based on raising living standards and educational opportunities for the rural poor and improving cultural and psychological well-being for urban dwellers.

Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley said, “The time has come for global action to build a new world economic system that is no longer based on the illusion that limitless growth is possible on our precious and finite planet or that endless material gain promotes well-being. Instead, it will be a system that promotes harmony and respect for nature and each other, that respects our ancient wisdom and traditions, that protects
our most vulnerable people as our own family, and that gives us time to live and enjoy our lives and to appreciate rather than destroy our world. It will be an economic system, in short, that is fully sustainable and that is rooted in true, abiding well-being and happiness.”

Bhutan is no longer alone in this pursuit of happiness. The movement is spreading. In 2011, the United Nations passed a unanimous declaration urging member nations to place “the pursuit of happiness” rather than economic growth at the forefront of their developmental agendas and to find ways to measure their success.

In the United States, a nation founded on the principle that all men have the inalienable right to life and liberty, the federal government has finally begun to get serious about the “pursuit of happiness.” In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services set up a panel of experts in psychology and economics, including Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, to define reliable measures of “subjective well-being, which may well become official government statistics.”

In 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a “revolutionary” plan to make joy and well-being the key indicators of growth rather than measures like GDP. The new assessment will be based on figures relating to such measures as work-life balance, recycling, household chores and levels of traffic congestion. Sarkozy asked two Nobel Prize-winning economists — Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University and India’s Armatya Sen — to help develop the new measures.

The United Kingdom had its inaugural Action for Happiness Day on March 20, 2013, and Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the U.K. would begin to publish a happiness index.

Not surprisingly, skeptics abound, and they raise questions about whether or not happiness can be accurately measured, and, more importantly, whether happiness can be increased across entire populations. Are we simply born happy or unhappy? Can happiness be sustained or does it shift or dissipate over time? For Veenhoven, the data overwhelm these objections. The inherent “inaccuracies,” he says, are “not a problem if you compare big numbers of respondents, such as when you are comparing countries. Then the inaccuracies balance out.”

### SOME NATIONS NEED CHEERING UP

One of the world’s poorest regions, Africa, includes the bottom 5 nations as ranked by the World Database of Happiness.

- **Benin**
  - 3.0
  - Scale from 1 to 10

- **Burundi**
  - 2.9
  - Scale from 1 to 10

- **Tanzania**
  - 2.8
  - Scale from 1 to 10

- **Togo**
  - 2.6
  - Scale from 1 to 10
IN a world that enjoys rankings, it is not surprising that a spate of global surveys has emerged in recent years to measure happiness. The Legatum Prosperity Index in London is a compendium of 142 countries that gauges global wealth and well-being. Professor Ruut Veenhoven’s World Database of Happiness offered its most recent findings in 2012. The list is based on surveys asking questions such as “How much do you enjoy life? How positive do you feel about the future? Do you feel generally content?”

Costa Rica abolished its military army in 1949 and has plans to become the first carbon-neutral country by 2021.

The Legatum Prosperity Index

1. Costa Rica
2. Denmark
3. Iceland
4. Switzerland
5. Norway
6. Finland
7. Mexico
8. Sweden
9. Canada
10. Panama
The country of Denmark often takes the top spot when rated for happiness. Experts cite good health care, gender equality and even bike riding as some reasons why.

The United Nations first published its World Happiness Report in 2013. Based on Gallup surveys of people in more than 150 countries, the 2013 report identified the five nations with the highest levels of happiness:

1. Denmark
2. Norway
3. Switzerland
4. The Netherlands
5. Sweden

Gallup published its own survey of positive emotions in 138 countries. Gallup asked its poll subjects whether they had experienced certain positive feelings the previous day. The results, which Gallup dubbed the Positive Experience Index, revealed that 10 out of the top 11 respondents were in Latin America. Given the widespread poverty in these nations, the results are surprising to some. But Gallup reasoned that the high scores reflect a cultural tendency in the region to focus on family, friends and the positives in life.

Paraguay 1
Panama 2
Guatemala 3
Nicaragua 4
Ecuador 5
Costa Rica 6
Colombia 7
Denmark 8
Honduras 9
Venezuela 10
El Salvador 11
The formula for increasing happiness will vary from nation to nation, but the framework will be similar. In fact, Bhutan, the tiny Himalayan kingdom with fewer than 750,000 inhabitants, can serve as a useful template for other nations seeking ways to foster happiness through policy action. The Center for Bhutan Studies published a detailed report on Bhutan’s efforts to make “gross national happiness” (GNH) a reality and offered up some governmental options.

The vast majority of Bhutan’s people consider themselves happy.

Lessons from Bhutan

The formula for increasing happiness will vary from nation to nation, but the framework will be similar. In fact, Bhutan, the tiny Himalayan kingdom with fewer than 750,000 inhabitants, can serve as a useful template for other nations seeking ways to foster happiness through policy action. The Center for Bhutan Studies published a detailed report on Bhutan’s efforts to make “gross national happiness” (GNH) a reality and offered up some governmental options.

Westerners might imagine Bhutan as a real-life Shangri-La — the inaccessible mountain utopia in James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon — but in fact, it has its share of worldly problems, including poverty, crime, gangs, violence and economic challenges.

Nonetheless, a vast majority of Bhutan’s people consider themselves happy, and the government is seriously devoted to raising the level of contentment for everyone. According to the report from the Center for Bhutan Studies, GNH can be raised in two ways: increasing the percentage of happy people or “decreasing the insufficient conditions” of the unhappy. What seems common sense actually requires careful planning on a national scope, and in Bhutan, the government had greater incentive to focus on decreasing the insufficiencies of the “not-yet-happy.”

“We have now clearly distinguished the ‘happiness’ in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable ‘feel good’ moods so often associated with that term,” wrote Karma Ura, the president of the Center for Bhutan Studies. “We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom.”

In order to create effective policy, the government needed to understand the specific problems that cause unhappiness. The report broke down the issue into nine domains such as living standards, psychological well-being, time use, education and health. Under those headings were 33 key indicators of what the unhappy were lacking.

Those who achieve sufficiency in less than half the domains are considered unhappy. In 2010, that translated into 10.4 percent of Bhutanese. That low number reflects the policies put in place over the past two decades, even before GNH became the official measure of the nation’s economic well-being. During that time, health-care efforts have resulted in the doubling of life expectancy. A focus on education turned into enrollment of nearly 100 percent of the nation’s children in primary school. And in an effort to sustain its pristine Himalayan beauty, the government instituted an environmental policy that ensures that it will remain carbon-neutral and that at least 60 percent of its landmass will remain under forest cover in perpetuity. In addition, export logging has been banned, and a monthly pedestrian day barring all private vehicles from Bhutan’s roads has been instituted.

Most importantly, Bhutan acknowledged that the government alone cannot be responsible for increasing national happiness. An effective GNH requires everyone, from civil servants to business leaders and private citizens, to ask how they can help. The index must be seen as a public good. — G.R.
9 measures of happiness according to Bhutan

- **Psychological Well-being**
  - Life satisfaction
  - Positive emotions
  - Negative emotions
  - Spirituality

- **Health**
  - Mental health
  - Self-reported health status
  - Healthy days
  - Disability

- **Time Use**
  - Work
  - Sleep

- **Education**
  - Literacy
  - Schooling
  - Knowledge
  - Value

- **Cultural Diversity & Resilience**
  - Speak native language
  - Cultural participation
  - Artistic skills

- **Good Governance**
  - Government performance
  - Fundamental rights
  - Services
  - Political participation

- **Community Vitality**
  - Donations (time & money)
  - Community relationship
  - Family
  - Safety

- **Ecological Diversity & Resilience**
  - Ecological issues
  - Responsibility toward environment
  - Wildlife damage (rural)
  - Urbanization issues

- **Living Standards**
  - Assets
  - Housing
  - Household per capita income