

Chapter 5

SELECTION FOR INCLUSION OF REPORTED RESULTS IN THE FINDINGS-ARCHIVE¹

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The prime aim of this database is to gather research findings on happiness and prepare these for synthetic analysis. Research synthesis makes sense only if based on studies that measure the same thing. In this case, that requires that the findings concern happiness defined as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole (cf. chapter 2) and not something else. Therefore, we screen all research reports in detail to determine which measures of happiness have been used and assess whether these fit our concept or not.

¹ Last update 1-4-2020 by Ruut Veenhoven

5/1 Selection process

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In the research reports we read, we focus on the measures of happiness used, which are mostly one or more questions that invite a self-report, e.g. *‘Taking all together, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please answer by picking a number between 0 and 10, where 0 means complete dissatisfied and 10 completely satisfied.*

5/1.1 Face-validity testing

For each of these questions we consider the fit with our definition of happiness as delineated in [Chapter 4](#) of this introductory text. This is called testing for *face validity* and involves close reading of questions used in questionnaires or interviews. In the case of the above single question on life-satisfaction there is evidently a fit.

In cases of observation of behavioral indications of hedonic level of affect, such as time-sampling of laughing and crying in infants, we also take a close look at the instructions for observers.

A measure either passes this test or not. We do not rate a degree of face validity.

5/1.2 Selectors

This selection is made by the senior staff of the World Database of Happiness, over the past years mainly by Ruut Veenhoven and today also by Ivonne Buijt and Jan Ott, who are both well-read in empirical research on subjective wellbeing. Incidental comparison of selections made by different staff members showed strong consensus. The few cases of initial difference sharpened our awareness of what is asked in questions, irrespective of the theoretical notions the investigator had in mind.

5/1.3 Verification

Below in the sections [5/2](#) and [5/3](#) of this chapter we provide examples of accepted and rejected measures. Next, all accepted measures are included in the Collection of Happiness Measures of this World Database of Happiness, where they are described in full detail. This all allows colleagues to check the selections we made.

5/1.4 Additional information

Not all research reports provide full detail about all measures of happiness used, e.g. when the text reads “a self-report measure of happiness was used”. In such cases,

we ask the author for the full text of the question or questionnaire. If doubt remains, a study is not included.

5/1.5 Difference with common validity testing in psychology

A common validity test in psychology is for *construct validity* and is quantified using the correspondence between scores on different questions in a questionnaire. This correspondence is assumed to reflect that the same phenomenon is measured but can also result from a causal interrelationship. Many of the 'Happiness Scales' we considered involve questions about self-perceived mental health, e.g. endorsement of the statement "I am a nervous person". However, mental health is not the same as happiness. You can be sound mentally but live in hell and be unhappy for that reason, while the happiness of mentally disturbed people is contingent to environmental factors such as acceptance of mental disorder and availability of mental health care.

Another common validity test is for *predictive validity*, typically correspondence with other phenomena assumed to be related, e.g. correspondence between happiness and social status. When applied in correlational research, this approach leads into circularity, if you select measures of happiness on their correspondence with social status you will always find a correlation between the two.

Much of this difference with common validity testing in psychology roots in the nature of the concepts used. Psychologists often deal with *fuzzy concepts*, such as 'neuroticism'. Since these concepts are ill-defined, face-validity testing is not possible. In this World Database of Happiness, we focus on a clearly defined concept as delineated in [Chapter 2](#) of this introductory text and that allows us to judge whether an operationalization (measure) fits that concept or not.

5/2 Accepted measures

5/2.1 [Measures of overall happiness](#)

5/2.2 [Measures of hedonic level of affect](#)

5/2.3 [Measures of contentment](#)

5/2.4 [Mixed measures](#)

The conceptual focus of this database of on happiness in the sense of *the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole*, which is also called 'life-satisfaction' (cf. [Chapter 2](#)). This global evaluation of one's life is seen to draw on two sources of information; how well one feels most of the time and to what extent one perceives that life brings what wants from it. These sub-evaluations are referred to as the 'components' of happiness, respectively the affective component called *hedonic level of affect* and the cognitive component called *contentment*. This database includes all three these variants of happiness and hence we inspect for each variant which measures are acceptable.

5/2.1 Measures of overall happiness

Overall happiness can be assessed by direct questioning only; not by questions that tap essentially different matters supposed to be related to happiness, as discussed in section [5.3](#). Questions on overall happiness can be framed in different ways: in closed questions, in open-ended questions and in focused interviews. In the latter two cases clear instructions for content-analysis of responses are required. Overall happiness cannot be assessed by peer ratings, because peers mostly do not know precisely what the subject has on his or her mind and rather imagine how they themselves would feel if they were in his or her shoes.

5/2.2 Measures of hedonic level of affect (affective component of happiness)

Hedonic level of affect can be assessed in three ways: by direct questioning, by projective tests and by ratings based on non-verbal behaviour. Again, the method of direct questioning is to be preferred: in particular, methods where the individual is asked several times during a certain period how pleasant he feels at that given time (time sampling).

Though generally less dependable, indirect methods can sometimes suffice. Some projective tests at least seem to be reasonably valid. Ratings by others based on observations of non-verbal behaviour will also suffice, if rating instructions are sufficiently specific. Unlike cognitive judgements, affective conditions are seen reliably in non-verbal behaviour.

5/2.3` Measures of contentment (cognitive component of happiness)

Contentment can be measured using means of direct questions only. Like overall happiness, contentment cannot validly be assessed by indirect questions or by peer-ratings. Direct questions must again be specific. They probably work best when preceded by an enumeration of one's major aspirations. Questions can be framed in various formats.

5/2.4 Mixed indicators

Several measures of happiness cover two or more of the above-mentioned happiness variants. The majority of these consist of single direct questions, which by wording or answer formats, refer to both overall happiness and hedonic level. As long as they do not labour specific deficits these questions are accepted.

Several measures involve multiple questions. Characteristically these questions cover both overall happiness and one or both of the discerned components. When all items meet the demands outlined above, such composite indicators are accepted.

A last format to be mentioned in this context is the 'focused interview' of which the 'depth interview' is a variant. Such interrogations tend to cover all three happiness variants. A lack of clear reports on the themes of enquiry and on rating procedures makes it difficult to assess their face validity.

5/3 Rejected measures

5/3.1 [Questionnaires involving items on other things than happiness](#)

5/3.2 [Summed life-aspect satisfactions](#)

5/3.3 [Comparisons with others or the past](#)

Many of the currently used measures of subjective well-being appear not to fit the concept of happiness defined here as the subjective enjoyment of one's life-as-a-whole (cf. [Chapter 2](#)). Findings yielded by such indicators are not included in the finding collections of this World Database of Happiness.

5/3.1 Scales involving non-happiness items

Many measures consist of lists of questions, parts of which refer to happiness as such and parts of which refer to related, but essentially distinct matters. For example, several questionnaires used in gerontology research, mix questions about happiness with items on 'social participation', 'future orientation' and 'health perception'. i.e. in the Life Satisfaction Index A (LSI-A), by Neugarten et al. (1961) Likewise, current scales in community mental health add items like 'nervousness', 'vigour' and 'emotional stability', e.g. in Dupuy's (1984) PGWB. Such indicators are rejected because it is not sure that high social participation, future orientation and vigour always mark a high appreciation of life. There are always socially active, future orientated and vigorous people who are profoundly dissatisfied with their life. Scores on indicators of this kind are difficult to compare and in correlation analysis, such indicators often produce contamination.

5/3.2 Summed life-aspect satisfactions

Another currently used method is to first ask separate questions on satisfaction with various domains of life, such as 'work', 'marriage' and 'leisure' and next combine the responses in a sum-score. This method has several drawbacks. Firstly, it does not adequately reflect the individuals 'overall evaluation': such sum-scores tap selected aspects of life only and it is the investigator, who awards weights rather than the subject. Secondly, not all aspect- satisfactions apply equally to everybody; how about the marriage-satisfaction of the unmarried and the work-satisfaction of the unemployed? Thirdly, the significance of life-aspects such as work and marriage is not the same for different times, cultures and social categories. Comparisons are therefore impossible with such indicators.

These objections apply not only to sum-scores of domain satisfaction i.e. Andrews & Withey, but also the 'semantic-differential scales' which involve the rating of one's life on various evaluation criteria such as 'boring/interesting', 'lonely/friendly' and 'hard/easy'. Such a scale is part of the much-used Index of Wellbeing by Campbell (1966)

5/3.3 Comparison with others and the past.

Several investigators have asked their subjects how happy they think they are compared to others, rather than how they feel themselves, e.g. in the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) by Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999). Such items are rejected. Even if one is happier than one's neighbour, one can still be unhappy. For the same reason the item 'I have been happier than I am now' is deemed unacceptable. Being less happy than before does not imply that one is unhappy. Likewise, the item 'If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing' in the much used Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al (1983) is not acceptable. Enjoying one's present life does not mean that one does not appreciate other ways of life.

5/4 Acceptance ratio

About a third of the available empirical studies on present happiness meets the validity demands for the measurement of happiness applied here. The acceptance ratio differs somewhat across variants of happiness. The number of research reports on studies that involved at least one valid measure of happiness versus the reports of studies that did not involve any valid measure of happiness is presented in table 5.4.

Table 5.4
Accepted and rejected measures used in reported studies

<i>Rejected measures only</i>		<i>At least one accepted measure used</i>		<i>Acceptable measure, but no new data</i>	
N	%	N	%	N	%
3.044	33	5.789	63	392	4

This conceptual rigor has a price, about half the measures considered are rejected, thereby excluding the findings obtained with these from the findings-archive. Including these findings would make that we get to know *more about less*, more findings, but less clarity on what they mean. In this World Hatabase of Happiness, we opt for knowing *less about more*; that is, more clarity on what happiness we with.

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