

## 6 HOW THE SURVEYS ARE GATHERED

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## Intro

Having established that average happiness is a valid indicator of the livability of society, the next step is to take a closer look at the available data. For that purpose, [section 6/1](#) considers the concept of 'society'. It will become apparent that the bulk of the available data concerns 'nations'. Next, in [section 6/2](#) I look at the research traditions, which produce data on happiness in nations. Finally, [section 6/3](#) reports how the scattered data were gathered.

## 6/1 Focus on contemporary nations

### *No data on happiness in 'primitive' societies*

Comparing societies is typically the subject of cultural anthropology. Unfortunately, anthropologists have as yet paid little attention to livability. Studies that did consider the matter used other output indicators than happiness, such as suicide and violent behaviours. There are no data on happiness in the 'Human Area Files' (Collection of anthropological research findings by society).

This neglect has several reasons. One is that most anthropologists stress cultural relativism, and for that reason have reservations about such an 'absolutist' concept as livability. Another reason is that anthropological methods of data gathering are not suited for the quantitative assessment of happiness.

Though understandable, the lack is deplorable. Data on happiness in primitive societies could provide an opportunity to test theories about faltering livability in the process of modernization. It would be particularly interesting to know how happy people are in the few 'unspoiled' hunter/gatherers societies that are closest to the situation in which the human species developed.

### *No data on happiness in former societies*

History does not inform us about livability of earlier societies either. There are some historical studies on health and life expectancy, but historians cannot assess how happy people were in the past. At best, we can make educated guesses based on observations by diarists or themes in the belle-letters. However, similar sources in present day society typically yield a very different picture of average happiness than representative surveys. Social commentators and novel writers tend to over-emphasize unhappiness.

Consequently, we must do with data from present day society. These data largely concern *nations*. The survey studies from which they result are typically instigated by national institutions, mostly the state.

### *Focus on contemporary nation-states*

All nation-states are in some sense a society. Even if a nation state hosts separate subcultures, it still provides a common political system and mostly more than that. Yet a society is not necessarily a nation. In fact, separate societies can exist under the roof of one nation, and one society can be split up into more than one nation. It is quite difficult to define precisely what a society is, and it is simply impossible to isolate non-state societies empirically. Hence, we can do little else than focus on nations

This is no better- than-nothing-choice. There are good reasons to focus on nations. Though 'nation' is not identical with 'society', there is at least a substantial overlap. Nations typically emerged from the clustering of similar local societies and state-formation has involved cultural homogenization and development of various new common structures. The longer nations exist, the more they tend to become a society.

Another point is that the current discourse is centred on nations rather than on societies. Mere societies can hardly influence their own livability. Only when state-like institutions have developed, such attempts become feasible and discussion of the matter hence sensible. In fact, the discussion about the Good Society has focussed on social reform in the nation-state; that is, on priorities in socio-economic development and social policy. For that purpose, national data are quite appropriate.

## 6/2 Survey studies that include questions on happiness

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Assessment of average happiness in nations requires surveys among representative samples of the general population. Such surveys came into use in 1950's, in first world nations. In the beginning, questions on happiness have been posed incidentally in surveys about various attitudes and health. Later, happiness became a regular topic in the following survey traditions.

### 6/2.1 International survey studies

After World War II several cross-national studies have been performed on values and aspirations around the world. A main purpose of these studies was identifying differences and similarities in concerns, for the purpose of promoting international co-operation. Several of these studies also assessed happiness.

The first of these was an 11-nation 'Tension' study, shortly after World War II (Buchanan & Cantril, 1953). The happiness data of this study are included in this collection. In 1960 Cantril performed his famous World Survey among 14 countries (Cantril 1965). That study involved what he called a 'ladder-rating' of present life. See table 1.3. This study was largely replicated in 1975 in the Kettering/Gallup World Survey (Gallup 1976). The happiness findings of this latter study are also in this data-collection.

Around 1980 two international value studies were performed, which both involved acceptable measures of happiness: One is a Japanese initiative and involved identical surveys in 13 nations (Leisure Development Centre, 1980). The other international value study came forth from the European Value Study in 1980, which was enlarged to the 22 nations [World Value Study I \(WVS I\)](#). In 1990 the World Value Study was replicated (WVS II). The rich data of these comparative studies are also included in this database. To date (July 2020) WVS VII became available. Since 1972, the European Commission performs bi-annual surveys in all EC countries. The emphasis of these [Eurobarometer](#) surveys is on the development of attitudes towards

European integration, but personal happiness is followed as well. The time series of this survey-program is now more than 45 years. Since 1995 a similar survey program exists in Latin America, called the [Latino Barometro](#). Since 2002 a similar program of periodical surveys exists in Asia and is called the [Asian Barometer](#) survey. The standard questionnaire involves questions on happiness, but the sample does not cover the general population, but restricts to working aged. A similar [Afro barometer](#) survey program exists since 1999 but the questionnaire does not include questions on happiness as yet. Since 2002 the [European Social Survey](#) assesses happiness every two years in all European countries and since 2002 a similar series of [European quality of life surveys](#) exists. Since 2012 the [Gallup World Poll](#) assesses happiness every year in some 150 nations.

## 6/2.2 National Quality of Life Surveys

Since the 1960's, most affluent nations have developed some kind of 'Social Indicator' system. These statistical systems are meant to monitor the quality of life in the country and to identify social problems at an early stage. Next to various social statistics, most of these systems involve periodical surveys.

These 'Quality-of-Life-Surveys' assess in the first place how well people are doing objectively; that is, how much money people have at their disposal, how well they are housed, whether they have paid work, to what degree they are socially isolated, etc. Most surveys also inquire about the subjective evaluation of these living conditions; how satisfied citizens are with their income, house, work and relationships. In that context most surveys also contain questions about the appreciation of life-as-a-whole.

Periodical Quality-of-Life-Surveys involving acceptable happiness items have been held in Japan ('Life of the Nation Survey' since 1958), Germany ('Wohlfahrt Surveys' since 1974), the Netherlands ('Life Situation Surveys' since 1980), South Africa ('South African Quality of Life Surveys' since 1983) and the USA ('[General Social Surveys](#)' since 1970). The above-mentioned Eurobarometer surveys provide bi-annual data on happiness in all EC countries separately (since 1972).

In most other western nations Quality-of-Life surveys are at least performed incidentally. Some of these one-time surveys involve acceptable measures of happiness: i.e. the Scandinavian Welfare Survey in the early 1970's (Allardt 1975) and Schulz's (1985) study in Austria.

### **6/2.3 National Panel Surveys**

Next to periodical Quality-of-Life surveys, some countries also have large scale panel studies that follow the same persons longitudinally. Most of these studies aim primarily at socio-economic variables, such as changes in income, work and housing. Some also contain questions on health and attitudes. Occasionally, such nationwide panel studies involve indicators of happiness: for instance, the American Panel Study on Income Dynamics (1968-1972) and the yearly [German Socio Economic Panel](#) (GSOEP) since 1985 and the [British Household Panel](#), now named Understanding Society.

### **6/2.4 Further surveys**

Questions on happiness and mood are often side issues in surveys about other subjects, for example in studies about mental health, medical consumption, addiction, leisure behaviour and political preferences. Usually, such studies use established measures. Their happiness data can therefore be inserted in existing time series. About a quarter of the data in this collection come from such studies.

## **6/3 Search procedure**

There is no international agency that collects the results of all these studies on happiness. Neither is there an international clearinghouse that keeps stock of current items in national surveys. Therefore, the available data had to be raked in by going through the entire literature on happiness. This laborious job was part of a wider search for empirical data on happiness, describe in detail in the Introductory text to the Bibliography of Happiness, chapter 3 [Collection and selection of scientific publications on happiness](#).

### **6/3.1 Number of findings found**

To date (July 2020) the database includes some 9000 distributional findings on happiness in 173 nations. Time series of at least 20 years with at least 10 datapoints are now available for 30 nations.

### **6/3.2 Completeness of the collection**

Data from international quality of life surveys are covered almost completely and this applies also for main national quality of life survey programs. We will have missed findings on happiness obtained in survey studies with another focus, such as election studies. Though incomplete, this collection of distributional findings on happiness in nations is the most complete source available at the moment.

## **6/4 Summary**

Data on happiness in human societies are available only for present day nation states. These data come from cross-national surveys as well as from periodical Quality-of-Life surveys in particular nations. This information was raked together by combing abstracts systems, library catalogues and databanks. Active investigators in the field were mailed. End 1995 761 usable studies were found from 66 nations in the period. The current number of studies included is mentioned on the start-screen of the database-program.

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For a more recent account of how research findings on happiness are gathered, see Introductory text to the Bibliography of Happiness, Chapter 3: [Collection of publications](#)