

The Good Life

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More than money

What makes us happy? **Robert M Worcester** reviews the survey evidence on happiness.

'Happiness is a warm puppy', according to Charles Schultz, creator of Snoopy, the American cartoon character. According to a MORI survey carried out in 1981 and repeated again in 1991 however, the prime consideration of subjective happiness for most people is their state of health. When asked to judge which several factors among a list of ten or so things are 'most important for you personally in determining how happy or unhappy you are in general these days', most people said 'health' (59 per cent), followed by 'family life' (41 per cent) and then 'marriage/partner' (35 per cent) and then 'job/employment of you/your family' (31 per cent). These factors stood well above education received (7 per cent), housing conditions (9 per cent) or even financial condition/money (25 per cent).

One person in four in Britain effectively said that money can indeed buy happiness, or perhaps felt that lack of it brought misery, recalling the immortal words of Charles Dickens's Mr. Micawber:

'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.'

Statistics from 54 countries around the world do in some degree bear out Micawber's homespun philosophy, according to the World Values

Survey, directed by Professor Ronald Inglehart at the University of Michigan. It found a .70 correlation between the subjective response that people are 'very' or 'quite' happy, and the objective measure of 'Real GDP per capita' (PPPS), from 1995 data reported in the Human Development Report 1998. This is a significantly higher correlation than that of the HDI (Human Development Index), which the UNDP computes using a combination of real GDP, longevity as expected at birth, and educational attainment as measured by adult literacy and enrolment ratios, which gives a correlation of .47 (see Figure 1).

Money isn't everything certainly, but it's said: 'It's way ahead of anything else.' Or is it? According to another poll carried out by MORI in Britain in 1993, when asked 'Overall in the last week, how have you been feeling? Have you been very happy, fairly happy, neither happy nor unhappy, fairly unhappy or very unhappy?', eight in ten (79 per cent) people reported they had overall been 'happy', 13 per cent reported being 'unhappy' and the rest were neutral. Interestingly, there were no 'don't knows.' Two groups associated with lower incomes, women and over 55s, were more likely to report being happy than men (82 per cent and 88 per cent respectively versus 76 per cent) and eighteen to 34 year olds, 81 per cent of whom reported being happy. And those with higher earning power, the 35 to 44 year old age cohort, were least happy, with one in five reporting being unhappy. More were happy in Wales (90 per cent) than in Scotland (75 per cent), reinforcing the English image of the dour Scot.

Surprisingly, marriage didn't make that much difference: while 79 per cent of those who were married said they were happy, nearly as many people who were single (78 per cent) and separated or divorced (76 per cent) were as well. This finding is in contrast with that of Professor Michael Argyle, emeritus reader in happiness (sic) at Oxford (see his article in this Collection), who reportedly has found that one of the most important guarantees of happiness, especially with men, is marriage. Not according to our findings it isn't. A happy sex life, however, was found to be a strong determinant in achieving an overall state of bliss.

Those who reported that they were 'satisfied' with their own sex life were significantly more likely to say they were happy than those who

Figure 1. World values survey happiness index and GDP

'Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy or not at all happy?'

No. Nation (%)	Not at all	Not very	Quite	Very	Total	Very/ Quite	Not Very/ NaA	Net	HDI*	GDP (\$in 1995)
01 Iceland	0	2	55	42	100	97	3	94	0.942	21,064
02 Sweden	1	4	59	36	100	96	4	91	0.936	19,297
03 Netherlands	1	4	55	40	100	96	4	91	0.941	19,876
04 Denmark	1	4	60	36	100	95	5	91	0.982	21,983
05 Australia	1	4	56	39	100	95	5	90	0.932	19,632
06 Ireland	1	4	53	42	100	95	5	89	0.930	17,590
07 Switzerland	1	5	57	38	100	95	5	89	0.930	24,881
08 Norway	1	5	65	29	100	94	6	88	0.943	22,427
09 Britain	1	6	55	38	100	93	7	87	0.932	19,302
10 Venezuela	1	6	39	55	100	93	7	87	0.860	8,090
11 Belgium	1	6	55	37	100	93	7	86	0.933	21,548
12 Phillipines	1	6	52	40	100	93	7	85	0.677	2,762
13 USA	1	7	53	39	100	92	8	84	0.943	26,997
14 France	1	7	69	23	100	92	8	84	0.946	21,176
15 Finland	1	7	72	20	100	92	8	83	0.942	18,547
16 Austria	1	8	60	30	100	91	9	81	0.933	21,322
17 Canada	2	10	55	32	100	88	12	75	0.960	21,916
18 Poland	2	11	73	14	100	87	13	74	0.851	5,442
19 W Germany	2	12	70	16	100	86	14	72	0.925	20,370
20 Japan	1	13	63	23	100	86	14	72	0.940	21,930

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Figure 1. cont.)

No. Nation (%)	Not at all	Not very	Quite	Very	Total	Very/ Quite	Not Very/ NaA	Net	HDI*	GDP (\$in 1995)
21 Turkey	3	12	46	39	100	86	14	71	0.782	5,516
22 Bangladesh	2	13	67	18	100	85	15	70	0.371	1,382
23 S Korea	2	14	73	11	100	84	16	68	0.894	11,594
24 Spain	1	15	64	20	100	84	16	68	0.935	14,789
25 Italy	3	15	69	13	100	82	18	64	0.922	20,174
26 Uruguay	2	18	59	21	100	80	20	60	0.885	6,854
27 Argentina	3	18	53	27	100	80	20	59	0.888	8,498
28 Brazil	2	18	58	22	100	79	21	59	0.809	5,928
29 Azerbaijan	1	21	67	11	100	78	22	56	0.623	1,463
30 Chile	2	22	46	30	100	76	24	52	0.893	9,930
31 China	2	23	49	25	100	74	26	49	0.650	2,935
32 Mexico	2	24	43	31	100	74	26	48	0.855	6,769
33 Portugal	3	23	61	13	100	74	26	48	0.892	12,674
34 South Africa	6	20	45	29	100	74	26	47	0.717	4,334
35 Dominican Rep.	1	25	41	32	100	74	26	47	0.720	3,923
36 Hungary	5	22	62	11	100	73	27	46	0.857	6,793
37 Nigeria	7	20	28	45	100	73	27	46	0.391	1,270
38 Czech	3	25	67	6	100	73	27	45	0.884	9,775
39 Ghana	4	24	45	26	100	72	28	43	0.473	2,032
40 India	4	26	47	23	100	70	30	40	0.451	1,422
41 Slovenia	4	30	55	11	100	66	34	32	0.887	10,549
42 Croatia	5	29	57	8	100	66	34	31	0.759	3,972

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43 Georgia	6	31	52	11	100	64	36	27	0.663	1,389
44 Latvia	4	33	60	3	100	63	37	27	0.704	3,273
45 Estonia	6	31	59	4	100	63	37	26	0.758	4,062
46 Romania	5	33	55	6	100	62	38	23	0.767	4,431
47 Armenia	8	36	51	6	100	57	43	14	0.674	2,208
48 Lithuania	4	41	51	4	100	55	45	10	0.750	3,843
49 Slovakia	5	43	48	4	100	52	48	-4	0.875	7,320
50 Russia	6	43	44	6	100	51	49	-2	0.769	4,531
51 Ukraine	9	43	43	5	100	48	52	-4	0.665	2,361
52 Belarus	8	46	41	5	100	46	54	-8	0.783	4,398
53 Moldova	8	48	40	4	100	44	56	-12	0.610	1,547
54 Bulgaria	12	50	31	7	100	38	62	-24	0.789	4,604
Average	3	18	56	24	100	80	20	59	0.772	10,605
Correlation									0.470	0.700

HDI Human Development Index, based on UNDP data reported in the Human Development Report 1998 (OUP), based on three indicators: life expectancy at birth, educational attainment and standard of living (real GDP per capita).

Source: World Values Survey.

Base: c. 1,000 in each country, 1995-97.

said they were 'dissatisfied'. While 82 per cent of those who reported they were satisfied with their sex life said they were happy, far fewer (62 per cent) of those unhappy with their sex life said they were happy with life generally, and more than a quarter, 27 per cent, said they were unhappy.

An important indicator of happiness right across the globe is people's perceived social class, which is of course tied to income in most cases. As shown in Figure 2, nearly eight in ten of those who describe themselves as upper class report that they are happy, while just one in five of those who report themselves to be lower class think of themselves as happy. If the average punter is indexed as 100 per cent, 30 per cent more of the toffs report being happy (they would, wouldn't they?) while only a third of those in the lower class are, compared to the average.

Religion makes relatively little difference, except that those who describe themselves as 'very' religious are significantly more likely to also describe themselves as happy than those who are 'not at all' religious (see Figure 3). Again, these findings differ from those of Professor Argyle. He found that attending church plays a big part in someone's state of mind, and those who attend regularly are much happier than non-believers. With so few attendees in the British population, even among those who profess belief in God, perhaps he's mixed apples and oranges?

In the survey for our book, *Typically British*, published in 1991, Eric Jacobs and I hoped to identify the secret to happiness. We compared the percentages of the adult population in Britain who said they were 'very happy' with those who said they were 'unhappy' to obtain a 'Happiness Index' and found that people who take part regularly in individual sports, or exercise (22 per cent of the population) were more than a third (+39 per cent) more likely to be happy than the average.

Those six in ten who had eaten wholemeal bread were a third (34 per cent) more likely to be happy, and people who'd eaten high fibre or wholemeal cereal were a quarter (26 per cent) more likely to be happy.

On the down side, smokers (31 per cent of the British) were 21 per cent less likely than the average to include happy people among them,

while those who'd had fish-and-chips or a fry-up were also among the least happy people in the land (Figure 4).

Unsurprisingly, those who had taken painkillers (such as aspirin or paracetamol) in the past two days were far less likely to be happy than those who had not. One surprise to me, as would be to Charles Schultz, was that pet owners were only marginally more likely to be happy (by 10 per cent) than non-pet owners.

While attending a football match was not predictive of happiness, nor was going to the cinema, a museum, a library or an art exhibition. However, going to an orchestral concert was, as was attendance at the opera, theatre and pop concerts or visiting a National Trust house or garden.

Looking back, we found people generally less happy in 1991 than in 1981, especially with their marriage or partner, how they used their spare time and their health.

Joy, gladness, pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment, delight, felicity, bliss – the American guarantee is the preservation of life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but it was Stendhal who said that 'to describe

Figure 4. What are happy people doing?

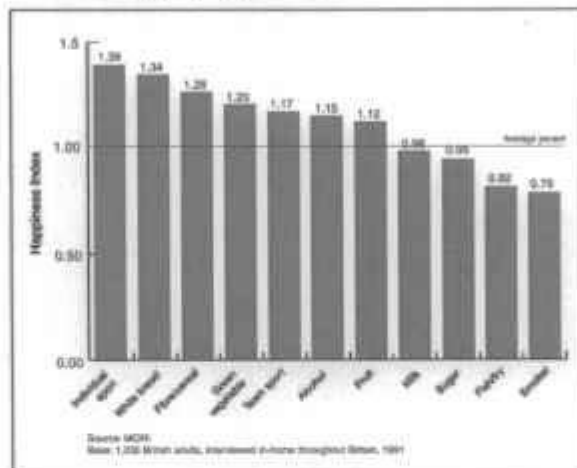


Figure 2. World values survey happiness index by social class
'Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy or not at all happy?'

Social class	%				Total	Very/ Quite	Not very/ NaA	Net	Index
	Not at all	Not very	Quite	Very					
Upper	1	9	57	32	100	89	11	79	130%
Upper middle	2	14	57	27	100	84	16	68	112%
Lower middle	2	16	60	22	100	82	18	64	105%
Working	3	22	53	21	100	74	26	48	80%
Lower	9	30	42	19	100	60	40	21	34%
Total	3	17	56	24	100	80	20	61	100%

Source: World Values Survey.
 Base: c. 1,000 in each country, 1995-97.

Figure 3. World, values survey happiness index by religiousness

'Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, quite happy, not very happy or not at all happy?'

%									
Religious	Not at all	Not very	Quite	Very	Total	Very/ Quite	Not very/ NaA	Net	Index
Very	4	17	47	32	100	79	21	58	105%
Rather	3	20	57	21	100	77	23	55	99%
Not very	2	20	60	18	100	78	22	56	101%
Not at all	3	21	56	19	100	75	25	51	92%
Total	3	19	54	23	100	78	22	55	100%

Source: World Values Survey.

Base: c. 1,000 in each country, 1995-97.

happiness is to diminish it', and another cynic, Chekhov, believed, or so he said, that 'the more refined one is, the more unhappy'. Perhaps Stendhal should be rephrased: 'To measure happiness is to diminish it'. Some might think so, but as happiness is a subjective state of mind, how else can it be described accurately than by the persons themselves. Are you happy? What would you say today to an interviewer who called on you in your home to probe your views? Today you might be 'up', and tomorrow 'down', but as your mood swings one way, so another person's mood might swing in the reverse direction. The device of the snapshot poll freezes the moment in time, and measures the mood of the nation.

Britain is a happy country, despite its reputation for reserve and stiff upper lip. By the British people's own evaluation of their own happiness they rank ninth in the league table for happiness. But the belief that money does not buy happiness is supported by the statistics that result if you take per capita income into account: Britain ranks only thirty-second of the 54 countries measured, and the Bangladeshi (at least before the awful floods ravaged their country), the Azerbaijani, the Nigerians and the Filipinos are the happiest people on (the measured) earth, when their low income levels are taken into account.

Factor in educational attainment and health however, and Britain regains its top ranking position, jumping to eleventh in the pecking order of the happiest nations on earth. So what does this prove? That money is by no means everything, and it isn't even in first place.

Robert M Worcester is Chairman of MORI.

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