

14. HAPPINESS AS AN EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM AND SELF-DETERMINATION

A Comparative Multilevel Analysis

Max Haller and Markus Hadler

University of Graz, Austria

ABSTRACT

In this paper, subjective well-being, as measured by survey questions on life satisfaction and happiness, is investigated from a sociological-comparative point of view. The central thesis is that happiness will be greater the more freedom a person has in her/his life decisions. It is hypothesized, therefore, that happiness will be higher in all those social contexts (micro and macro) which provide a person with greater freedom. Hence, happiness should be higher among the employed, among persons in higher positions and with higher incomes, and happiness should also be higher in free market and democratic, and in less stratified societies. A comparative empirical analysis (multilevel regression) is carried out, using survey data on 41 nations from the *World Value Survey 1995-97*. The finding that happiness is related significantly to the degree of individual freedom is fully confirmed. It also has been proven that people who live in circumstances providing more freedom of personal choice are happier. However, macro-social conditions are not directly relevant for personal freedom and happiness; this happens only through their perception and through their expected change (improvement or stagnation) in the future.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, happiness has become a topic investigated intensively by social psychologists (Argyle, 1987; Michalos, 1991; Myers, 1993; Kahnemann & Diener, 1999), sociologists (Veenhoven, 1989; 1993; Bellebaum, 1992), political scientists (Lane, 2000) and economists (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). Already in the Sixties, large-scale empirical surveys on mental health and the subjective quality of life of the population have been carried out in the United States (Gurin et al., 1960; Bradburn, 1969); recently, in many advanced countries regular surveys on subjective quality of life have been established (Campbell, 1981; Glatzer & Zapf, 1984). The relevance of happiness from the personal, social-scientific and political-practical perspectives is evident (see also Veenhoven, 1994, pp. 102f.; Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002). To become and to remain happy is a fundamental goal and right of any human acknowledged not only by the political philosophy of utilitarianism. Thus, striving towards happiness has been embodied as a fundamental human right into the venerable constitution of the United States; today, many governments consider the advancement of happiness of their peoples at a primary political goal; the focus on

207

Wolfgang Glatzer, Susanne von Below, Matthias Stoffregen (eds.), *Challenges for Quality of Life in the Contemporary World*, 207-231.

© 2004 Kluwer Academic Publishers.