

SOUTH-AFRICANS ARE FAIRLY HAPPY

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South Africa a sink of unhappiness?

“Zimbabweans even happier than South Africans” was in a headline on the front page of a major South African newspaper in June 2012². The article reported an international study according to which South Africans were the unhappiest people in the world and even unhappier than people in Zimbabwe. Several other South African newspapers reported in the same vein. This news report strikes as strange. How can South Africans be the least happy, while the standard of living is the highest in Africa? And why do so many Zimbabweans seek a better life in South Africa if that country is such a sink of unhappiness? So there seems to be something wrong with this information.

The Happy Planet Index does not measure happiness

The news reports were based on a press-release about the latest version of the ‘Happy Planet Index’ issued by the New Economic Foundation in the UK (NEF 2012). This Happy Planet Index is not about the happiness of people in the first place, but rather about their use of the planet’s resources. It denotes the ecological efficiency of countries in producing happiness.

The Happy Planet Index combines two indicators, first how long and happy people live in a country and second how much resources citizens consume. How long and happy people live in a country is measured by the index of ‘Happy Life Years’, which combines civil registration data on longevity with survey data on average life satisfaction in nations (Veenhoven 2007a). Consumption of resources is measured using the ‘Ecological Footprint’, which is an estimate of the amount of land required to produce the food and energy consumed by the average citizen (Wackernagel 2012).

The next step is assessing how much input in terms of resources is being used for the output in terms of happy life years. To that end the number of happy life years is divided by the ecological footprint. This results in a high score for countries where people live long and happy at low costs to the planet. Costa Rica is an exemplary case. The energy use is low in that country, both because of the climate and its lack of heavy industry. Likewise this formula results in low scores for countries where people live short and unhappy lives in spite of much consumption. Russia is such a case; energy use is high in that country both because of its cold climate and its heavy industry.

This helps to understand why South Africa scores low on the Happy Planet Index. The number of happy life years is at the medium level in South Africa

(Veenhoven 2012a), while the ecological footprint is relatively high. Life is much worse in Zimbabwe, mainly because the poverty, but this poverty gives rise to a low ecological footprint and thus results in a higher score on the HPI.

Average happiness in South Africa

This begs the question of how happy South Africans really are. Research findings on happiness in South Africa are gathered in the nation report 'Happiness in South Africa' of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012b).

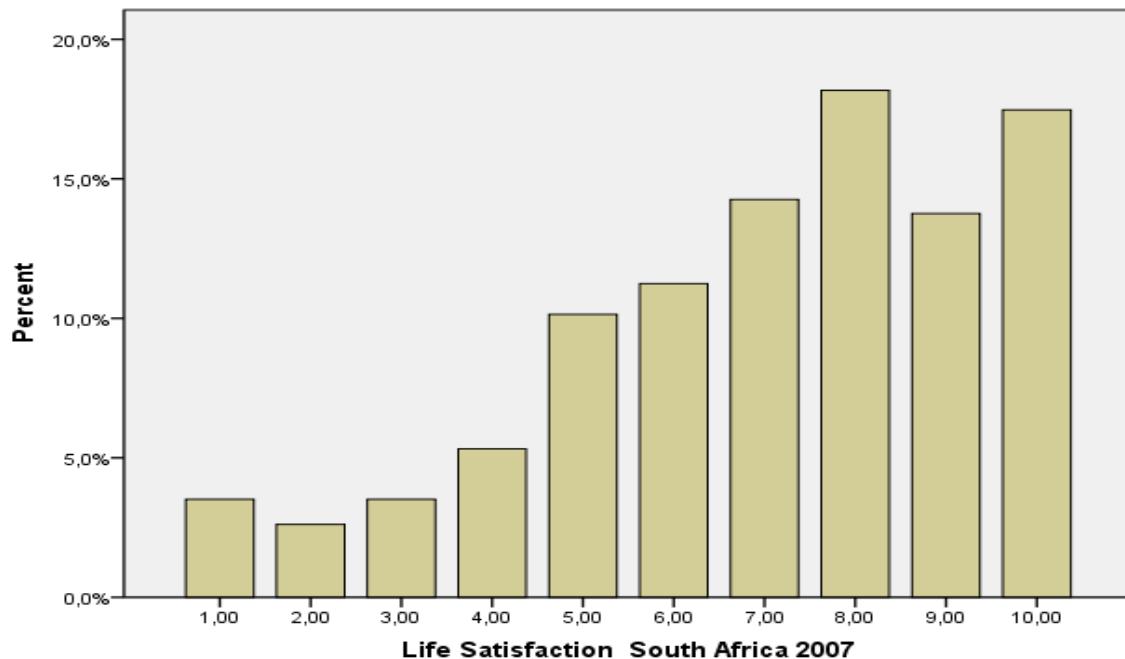
The first representative survey study that involved questions about happiness was held in 1981 and the most recent study in 2011. In this paper I focus on the findings of periodical survey studies that have used the same question over the years and that allow comparison with other nations. To that end I use findings of the World Values Survey (WVS), the latest wave of which was held in 2007. One of the questions presented to a representative sample of the adult population reads as follows: "Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please rate in a number between 1 and 10, where 1 stand for 'dissatisfied' and 10 for 'satisfied'³. The distribution of responses is presented below on figure 1.

In this bar-chart we can see that most South Africans are happy, some 75% rate their life with the number 6 or more. About 25% are fairly happy and rate 6 or 7 and 50% are very happy and rate their life 8 to 10. Still 25% South Africans is unhappy rate 5 or below and some 10% is even very unhappy and scores 3, 2 or 1. The average on this 1 to 10 scale is 7, which corresponds to 6,7 on the more commonly used scale 0 to 10 scale.

In this same survey study respondents also answered a question on how 'happy' they are, 23% indicated to be unhappy, ticking the options 'not at all happy' or 'not too happy'⁴, which corresponds to the 25 % scoring 5 or below on the above mentioned question on life satisfaction. 35% ticked the option 'quite happy' and 42% the option 'very happy' and these numbers also fit the pattern of responses to the question on life-satisfaction.

Life-satisfaction was also assessed in four more surveys of the South African population since the year 2000, the findings of which are presented in the nation report 'Happiness in South Africa' of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012c). All these studies found somewhat lower scores. The average of life-satisfaction over all five surveys is 5,8 on scale 0-10 and we will use this number for the following comparison with other nations.

Figure 1
Happiness in South Africa 2007



Source: WVS website

How happy are South Africans relatively?

This same question on life-satisfaction has been answered by representative samples of the population on 149 nations between 2000 and 2009 and the average scores are listed in the 'Rank report on average happiness in nations' of the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012c). This allows us to compare the South African average of 5,8 with averages observed in other countries.

Costa Rica is on top of the rank list with an average of 8,5⁵ and the lowest is Togo with an average of 2,6. With its average of 5,8 South Africa is in the middle, that is, on place 78 in this list of 149 nations.

The happiness in all countries is depicted on the world map on figure 2. The darker the green, the happier the country. It is easy to see that South Africa is among the happiest countries on the African continent, but that average happiness in South Africa is lower than in the America's and in Western Europe. Happiness-wise South Africa is comparable to Eastern Europe.

Figure 2
World map of happiness



Source: World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2012d)

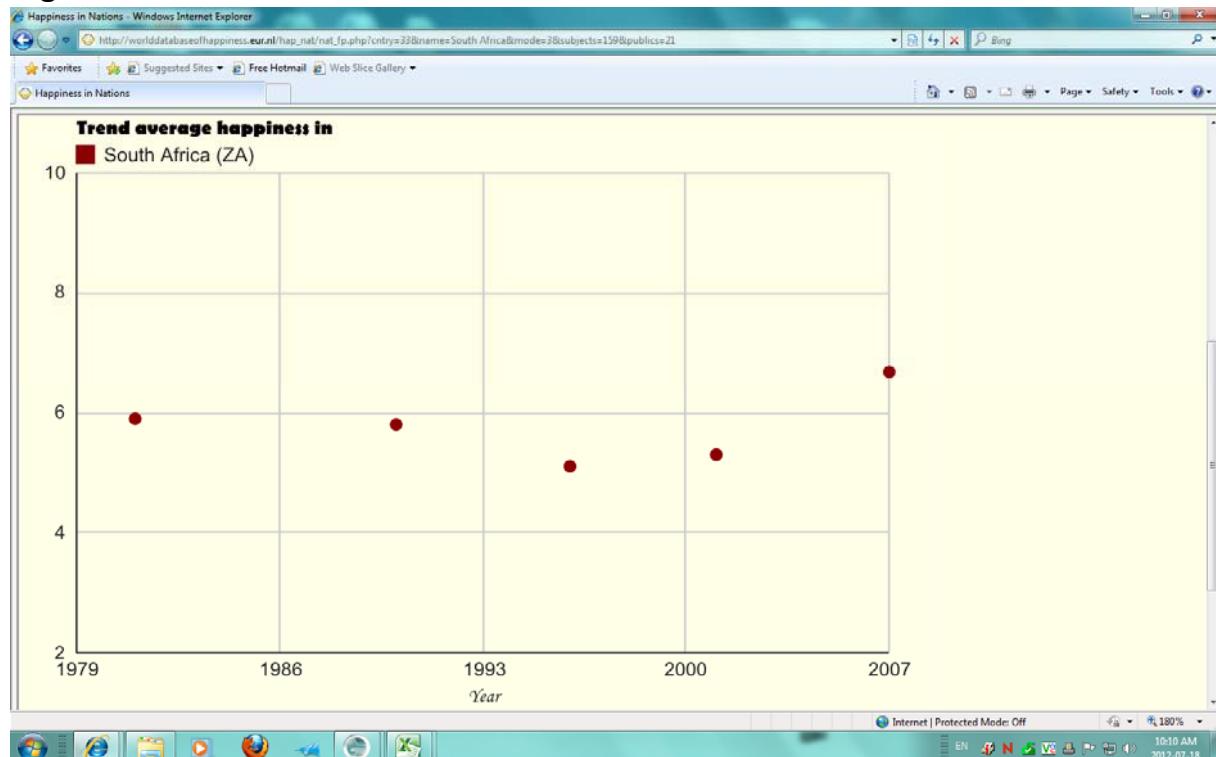
Did South Africans get happier?

In order to assess whether South Africans got more or less happy over time, we must rely on surveys that used the same question in the same context on different points in time. The best available series comes from the World Values Survey, which was held in 1981, 1990, 1995, 2001 and 2007. The observed scores on the above mentioned question on life-satisfaction are presented in figure 3.

Over these years the average was around 6, with a slight dip in the 1990s and a slight rise in 2007. Scores on the question on happiness follow a similar pattern. There is no significant trend either upwards or downwards in responses to other questions in other surveys show a mixed picture. So happiness in South Africa seems to have remained at the same level in the last 30 years.

Yet, due to the AIDS epidemic, life-expectancy has decreased in the 1990s and as a result the number of happy life years has declined in this period.

Figure 3



Feeling happy and being contented

When assessing how much we like the life we live, we draw on two sources of information; how well we feel most of the time and how well life-as-it-is fits our notions of how-life-should-be. These sub-appraisals are seen as 'components' of happiness, respectively an *affective component* called 'hedonic level of affect' and a *cognitive component* called 'contentment' (Veenhoven 1984: chapter 2).

The affective component seems to be determined by the gratification of *needs* in the first place and roots as such in human nature. The cognitive component is rather determined by the realization of wants, which root in human culture (Veenhoven 2007b).

Though these components tend to be related, they can differ; one can feel good most of the time but be discontented, or be contented cognitively but feel miserable affectively. Which of these discordant combinations is most indicative of human thriving? In our view that is the combination of high affect and low contentment, since that means that essential needs are being gratified, while there are still things one wants to achieve, which will keep us going. The combination of high contentment and low mood is less likely to give rise to fully functioning and is indicative of resignation⁶.

These components of happiness can be measured and data on each are also available for most countries of the world (Veenhoven 2012d). This allows us to assess how these components balance in South Africa.

Level of affect

The best available measure of hedonic level of affect in nations is an affect balance scale constructed from responses to 14 questions about how one had felt yesterday in the Gallup World Poll. Part of these questions concern positive feeling, e.g. “I laughed a lot” and part concern negative feelings, e.g. “I felt worried”. All questions are answered with either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The percentage of yes-answers to negative items is subtracted from the percent yes-answers to positive items⁷.

Positive feeling appear to be more frequent in all countries of the world and the difference is therefore always positive. Differences range from 11% in Ethiopia to 66% in Iceland. In South Africa positive feelings outweigh negative feelings by 49%, which is slightly above the median value is 46% (Veenhoven 2012e).

Contentment

Contentment is measured using Cantril’s (1965) question on how one rates ones present life on a ladder of which the top represents the ‘best possible life’ and the bottom the ‘worst possible life’⁸.

Average scores range from 3 in Sierra Leone to 8 in Denmark. In South Africa the score is 5,3⁹, which is slightly below the median of 5.5 (Veenhoven 2012f)

So on these two components of happiness South Africa also scores in the middle. This underlines the robustness of the findings on overall happiness presented above.

There is no imbalance between how happy South Africans feel affectively and how they judge their life cognitively. At best there is a slight tendency of cheerful discontentment, which is better than depressed contentment would have been.

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Overview of happiness surveys using measure type 31D: 11 step best-worst possible life

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Notes

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² Beeld, June 12th 2012

³ In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded O-SWI-c-sq-n-10-a

⁴ In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded O-HL-u-sq-v-v-a

⁵ The score of 8,5 for Costa Rica is based on only one survey with 1000 respondents. The next happiest country is Denmark with an average of 8,3 based on 8 surveys between 2000 and 2009

⁶ Marxists would see it as 'false consciousness'

⁷ In the World Database of Happiness this measure is coded A-AB-yd-mq-v-2-b

⁸ In the World Database of Happiness this question is coded C-BW-c-sq-l-11-c

⁹ Average of two surveys in 2007: the PEW survey which observed n average of 5.5 and the Gallup World Poll which observed n average of 5.2