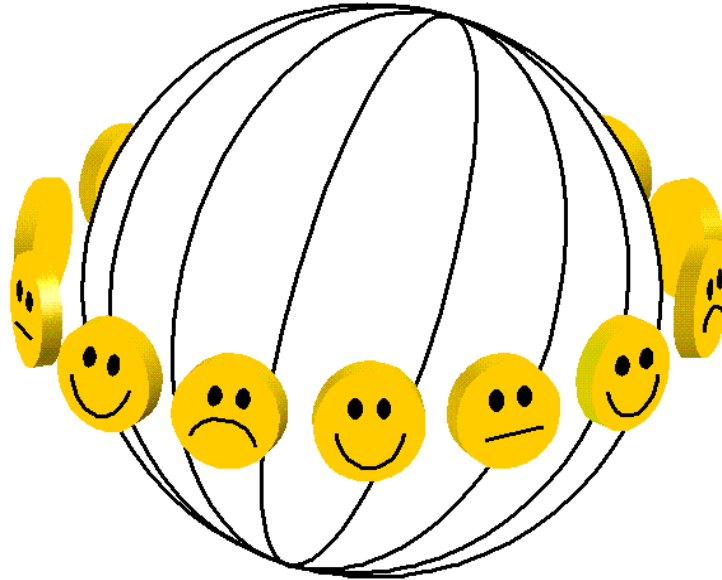


# WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS

Continuous register of research on  
subjective appreciation of life



Directed by Ruut Veenhoven  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

**PROSPECTUS 2009**

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Free available on the Web

<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/>

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# 1 Overview

The World Database of Happiness is an ongoing register of scientific research on subjective appreciation of life. It brings together findings that are scattered throughout many studies and prepares for research synthesis. This database opens research at the level of findings. The data-system is called a *findings catalogue*.

The Database consists of five collections, which are linked:

- Bibliography of Happiness
- Directory of Happiness Investigators
- Collection of valid measures of happiness (Item bank)
- Collection of Distributional Findings
  - Happiness in Nations (general public)
  - Happiness in Publics (special groups)
- Collection of Correlational Findings

Cross-national analysis is facilitated by two data additional collections: 'States of Nations' and 'Trends in Nations'.

The database is freely available on the Web. The Internet address is:  
<http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>

The database is also available on CD-ROM. See ordering information.

The Dutch Science Foundation NWO supports the development of this database.

## 2 Philosophy

### **Interest in happiness**

Happiness is a highly valued matter. Most people agree that it is better to enjoy life than to suffer, and endorse public policies that aim at creating greater happiness for a greater number of people. Though not everybody accepts the utilitarian axiom that happiness is ultimately the only value, the desirability of happiness as such is almost undisputed. This appears in high ranks for happiness in survey studies about value priorities.

The aim of creating greater happiness for a greater number requires understanding of happiness. First of all it demands that we can grasp the main determinants of happiness, not only *what* makes people happy, but also the reason *why*. Secondly, we also must have a view on consequences of happiness, in order to detect possible self-destructive effects and to appraise synergy with other values.

Efforts to understand human happiness have absorbed a lot of thought. Happiness was a major issue in early Greek philosophy and several later philosophical schools. Currently the subject gains attention in the social sciences, in particular in Social Indicators Research. Papers on happiness fill many bookshelves.

### **Empirical study of happiness**

Philosophical studies of happiness produced a lot of ideas, but little operational knowledge. In fact, it raised more questions than answers. Many theoretical controversies could not be solved by the logic of reasoning alone; usually, empirical validation was not possible.

The advent of the social sciences promised a breakthrough. New methods for empirical research opened the possibility to test theories of happiness and to identify conditions for happiness inductively. This instigated a lot of research. In the last decades some 3500 empirical studies have considered the matter; in the beginning mainly as a side-issue in studies about health and aging, but currently also as a main subject

This stream of research has not yet crystallized into a sound body of knowledge on happiness. Preliminary questions about conceptualization and measurement are now fairly well solved, but the understanding of processes and conditions involved in determinants and consequences of happiness is still very incomplete and tentative. There are several reasons why the new stream of empirical research on happiness has not yet brought the expected break-through. In addition to complexities in the subject matter, there are several practical problems.

### *Practical impediments*

The first and most simple reason for the lack of progress is lack of coordination. The research effort is highly redundant; the same issues are investigated over and over again, in the same way. As a result the range of variables considered is still rather small and the methodological progress slow.

A related problem is that the research findings are very scattered and difficult to retrieve. Consequently, many of the findings get lost.

The second reason is the confusion of tongues. Words like happiness and life-satisfaction denote different phenomena. Currently most investigators define it as subjective appreciation of life-as-a-whole. However, some authors also include objective notions of mental health and appropriate behavior. Consequently, indicators of happiness used in empirical research tend to be different and often incomparable. Getting an overview of the research findings requires first of all a grouping of studies that measured the same matter.

### *Methodological limitations*

A more basic reason is in the dominant research approach. The bulk of empirical happiness studies consist of cross-sections in a particular country. Typically investigators try to identify conditions for happiness by their correlates. For instance, the observation in American studies that the happy tend to have high incomes is seen to mean that money buys happiness and that the basic underlying mental process is social comparison. This approach falls short for several reasons.

Firstly, correlations say little about cause and effect. If rich Americans tend to be happier, this does not prove that money buys happiness, because happiness can also boost earning chances. There are in fact strong indications that a positive appreciation of life facilitates social functioning. Separation of cause and effect requires panel studies. Such studies are scarce as yet, and the data that is available is again, scattered.

Secondly, conditions for happiness are probably not the same at all times and at all places. Neither are its consequences. Though there are obviously several universal requirements for a happy life (such as food and possibly meaning), most effects seem to be contingent on characteristics of the person and situation. For instance, the correlation between happiness and income may restrict to materialistic persons in socially unequal countries. Usually, such contingencies cannot be detected in single studies in one country. They can be identified only if many studies are compared in a systematic meta-analysis.

Last, current correlational studies in one nation cannot grasp macro-social conditions for happiness. The focus is on differences in happiness

within nations; they are blind for variation in happiness between nations. Therefore, happiness research has as yet little relevance for major political discussions such as the priority of continuous economic growth or the benefits of human rights protection. Investigation of such matters requires cross-national studies, preferably in a semi-longitudinal design. Such studies are scarce as yet, but we can do a lot by comparing the available one-nation studies.

### **Aims of the database**

The World Database of Happiness is meant to overcome these problems.

First of all its *Bibliography of Happiness* provides a fairly complete collection of contemporary publications. This may help to get an overview of the field and to trace literature on specific issues.

Secondly, the database provides two homogenous collections of research findings, a collection of correlational findings (*Correlates of Happiness*) and a collection of distributional findings (*Happiness in Nations*). Both collections are based on the same concept of happiness and consequently on the same array of happiness indicators. Happiness is defined as 'the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole positively', in short: how well one likes the life one lives. This concept is delineated in more detail in the book that laid the ground for this project (*Conditions of happiness*, Kluwer Academic 1984).

The collection of *Correlates of Happiness* provides an assortment of comparable correlational findings that is ordered by subject matter. The collection provides a convenient overview of the available research and can serve as a basis for meta-analysis. Because the collection covers data from different nations and social categories, meta-analysis can reveal universal patterns as well as contingencies.

The collection of findings on *Happiness in Nations* provides a collection of comparable observations about level and dispersion of happiness in nations. First of all, the data on the average level of happiness serves to mark off more and less livable societies. The data is also of use for monitoring progress and decline. The data on dispersion of happiness in nations can be used in comparative studies of inequality in life chances. While *Happiness in Nations* is about the general population, the collection *Happiness in Publics* provides information about level and dispersion in specific segments of the population, such as the elderly, housewives and students.

The *Directory of Investigators* lists addresses of scientists who have published on happiness. It is meant to facilitate communication in the field.

### **Data gathering**

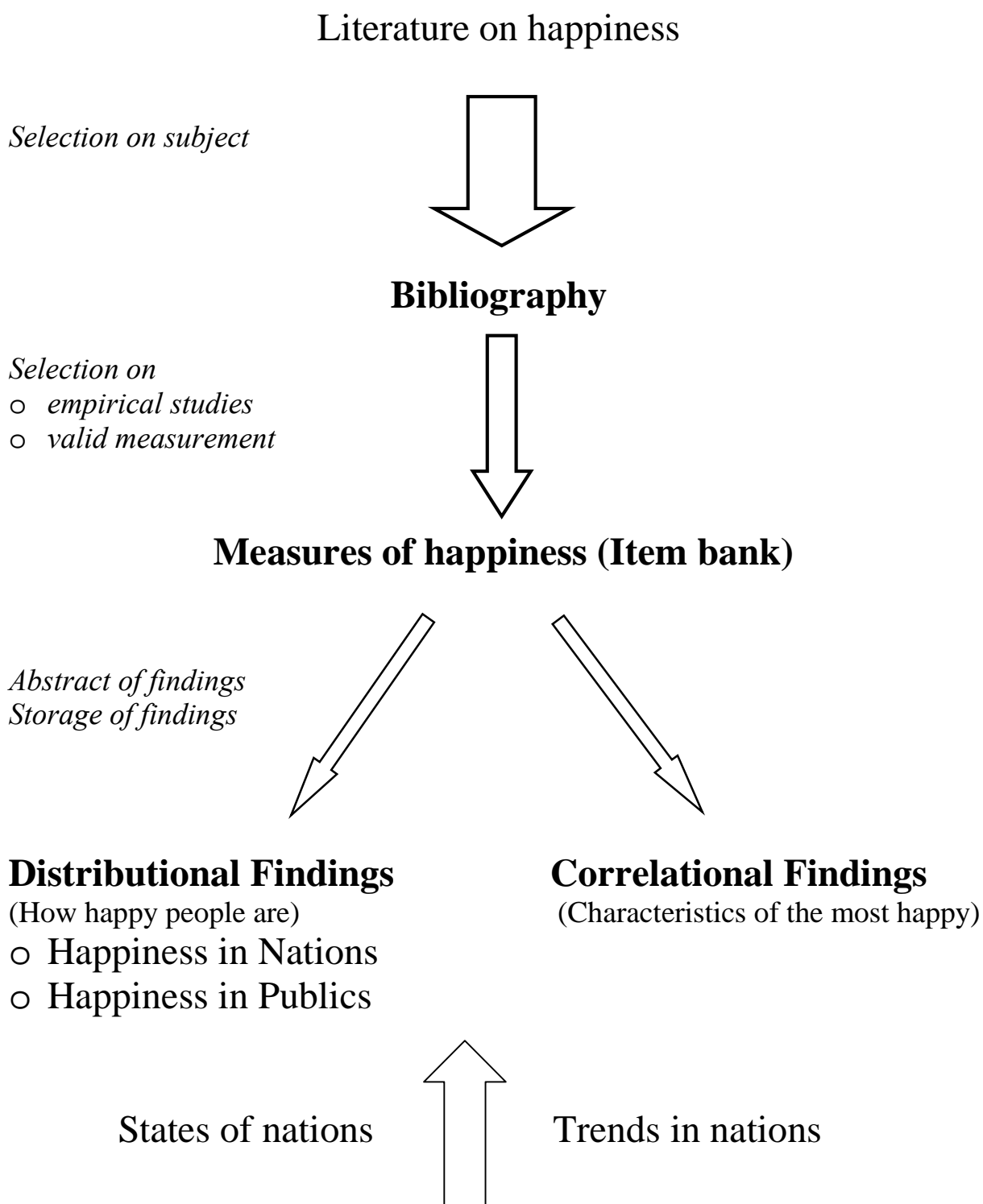
The data for these collections are largely drawn from publications on happiness in books and journal articles. However, this database is not limited to findings that reached 'authorized' publications. Grey reports and mere data-files are also included.

One reason for this strategy is that the original investigator does not publish many findings that may be relevant in a meta-analysis because they appeared not to be relevant in the context of his report. Another reason is that the publication process involves some systematic biases, one of which is under-report of non-correlations.

By deliberately including 'unpublished' data this database allows a more realistic view of conditions for happiness. Therefore, meta-analyses based on this database can yield conclusions that differ from impressions based on narrative literature surveys.

### 3 Collections

The database consists of several interrelated collections that are structured in the following way:



## 3.1 Bibliography of Happiness

### Scope

- Any research report that refers to the subjective appreciation of life-as-a-whole, even if this subject is only a side issue.
- Not included are related fields like 'mental health', 'social adjustment' 'alienation' and satisfaction with 'domains of life'.

### Coverage 1-7-2009:

- 5758 titles.
- Almost complete coverage of the social-science literature up to 2008 in English, German, and Dutch.
- Includes not only journal articles, but also books, dissertations, conference papers and unpublished research reports.

### Contents:

- Title descriptions involving:
  - Author, title, publisher or journal, year of publication
  - Language of the report
  - Type of study
- Subject classification (388 subject categories)
- Data classification (empirical studies only)
  - Time frame: past / present / future / perceived change
  - Variant measured: overall happiness / hedonic level / contentment
  - Included or not in the finding catalogs ('Distributional Finding' or 'Correlational Findings'), depending on whether the happiness measure fits our conceptualization.

### Extra facilities in full database: (not on Internet)

- Select: on year of publication, on type of study, on data-type (time-frame, variant of happiness)
- The full database is in MS-ACCESS. File available on request.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_bib/bib\\_fp.php](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_bib/bib_fp.php)

## 3.2 Directory of Happiness Investigators

### Scope:

- Address data of scientists who have published on the subject of subjective appreciation of life. Includes most authors of works in the 'Bibliography of Happiness'.
- Research groups that focus on the quality-of-life.

### Coverage at 1-7-2009:

- 8926 names
- About 2500 recent addresses, of which some 1100 with e-mail.
- Mainly investigators who published after 1975.
- Fairly complete up to 2008.

### Contents:

- Name
- Institution
- Address
- Year of publications on happiness
- Link to publications

### Availability:

- The addresses are available to peer-researchers for scientific purposes only.
- The list (or selection on subject, countries) is send on request as an E-mail attachment or paper print (labels). Investigators can be selected by subject or by nation.
- Submit a request with rationale to [veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl)

### 3.3 Collection of Happiness Measures (Item bank)

#### Scope:

- Valid measures of happiness:
  - Measures of overall appreciation of ones life-as-a-whole
  - Measures of hedonic level of affect (affective component: how well one feels generally)
  - Measures of contentment (cognitive component: perceived realization of wants)

#### Coverage at 1-7-2009:

- 1202 valid measures, mainly single questions

#### Contents:

- Full description classified by:
  - Happiness variant
  - Time reference
  - Method of observation
  - Rating of responses
- Full text in English, occasionally in other languages
- Reference to
  - Observed distribution of responses
  - Observed reliabilities

#### Extra facilities in full database: (in MS-Access file, not on Internet)

- Selection by method
- This inventory of indicators is included in the Catalog of Correlational Findings and is available on request on CD-ROM.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_quer/hqi\\_fp.htm](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_quer/hqi_fp.htm)

## 3.4 Collections of Distributional Findings

### 3.4.1 Collection of Happiness in Nations

#### Scope:

- Distributions of happiness in nations, as observed in representative samples of the adult population.
- Only findings based on survey questions that validly tap an individual's 'overall appreciation of his own life-as-a-whole'.

#### Coverage at 1-7-2009:

- 4344 distributions in 145 countries between 1945-2008.
- Time series for 15 countries of 25 years and more.
- Mainly first world countries, but also data from some third and second world nations.
- Fairly complete up to 2008.

#### Contents:

- Standard abstracts of findings involving:
  - Happiness indicator: full description.
  - Statistics: frequency distribution in %, mean and standard deviation. Comparison is facilitated by transformation of all scores to range 0-10.
  - Number of respondents, non-response.
  - Bibliographics: author, title, year of publication, page reference.
  - Survey name: name of survey program or institute, location of data file.
- Summary reports of nation rankings and trends over time.

#### Extra facilities in full database (in MS-Access, not on Internet)

- More detail about sampling and interrogation
- Additional cross-national data on happiness in special groups (children, students, aged people)
- References to research reports and datasets
- Full database available on request, by E-mail or on CD-ROM.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_nat/nat\\_fp.php](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_nat/nat_fp.php)

### 3.4.2 Collection of Happiness in Special Publics

#### Scope:

- Distributions of happiness in special publics, such as aged or handicapped people.
- Only findings based on survey questions that validly tap an individual's 'overall appreciation of his own life-as-a-whole'.

#### Coverage at 1-7-2009:

- 1306 studies in 211 nations between 1911 and 2008.
- 1856 distributional findings in 152 different publics.
- Mainly first world countries, but also data from some third and second world nations.
- Fairly complete up to 2000.

#### Contents:

- Happiness indicator: full description.
- Statistics: frequency distribution in %, mean and standard deviation. Comparison is facilitated by transformation of all scores to range 0-10.
- Number of respondents, non-response.
- Bibliographics: author, title, year of publication, page reference.
- Survey name: name of survey program or institute, location of data file.

#### Extra facilities in full database (in MS-Access, not on Internet)

- More detail about sampling and interrogation
- Additional cross-national data on happiness in special groups (children, students, aged people)
- References to research reports and datasets
- Included in the Catalog of Correlational Findings, which is available on CD-ROM on request.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_pub/pub\\_fp.php](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_pub/pub_fp.php)

## 3.5 Collection of Correlational Findings

### Scope:

- Empirical research findings on co-variants of happiness. Not only factors found to be statistically associated to happiness, but also non-correlates.
- Only findings yielded by indicators that validly tap happiness as the 'overall appreciation of one's life-as-a-whole'.
- All findings that could be traced. Not only the ones that reached scientific journals.

### Coverage at 1-7-2009:

- 1306 studies in 211 nations between 1911 and 2008.
- 11123 correlational findings.

### Contents:

- Standard abstracts of correlational research findings ordered by subject, country and time. The abstracts include detail about:
  - Bibliographic source: author, year, page reference
  - Study design: population, sample, number of subjects, year
  - Co-variate: label, measurement, subject-category.
  - Happiness-measure: type
  - Statistics: association, significance
  - Elaborations of the statistical relationship
- Reports of all findings by subject category, such as 'age' or 'income'. These reports are in html and can be downloaded from the website.

### Extra facilities on full database (not on Internet, source in MS Access):

- Selections: We can make selections by nation, time and happiness measure. We can select full studies as well as abstracts of research-findings on some subject.
- More detail about study design and distribution of responses to happiness measures.
- This database is too big to be downloaded from the web, but is available on CD-ROM. See page 17 for ordering.
- If you prefer that we do the searches, tell us what you want to know.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_cor/cor\\_fp.htm](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_cor/cor_fp.htm)

## 3.6 Data file ‘States of Nations’

### **Aim:**

- To facilitate cross-national analysis of happiness

### **Scope:**

- Nations in which the distribution of happiness is assessed by means of general population surveys

### **Coverage 1-7-2009:**

- 155 nations
- 1960 - 2008

### **Variables:**

- Characteristics of nations, such as ...
  - Economy
  - National character
  - Demography
- Distribution of happiness in nations
  - Average level of happiness, measured by means
  - Inequality in happiness, measured by standard deviations
  - Happy life-years (0-1 happiness x life-expectancy)
  - Equality adjusted happiness (mean divided by the standard deviation)
- Correlates of happiness (concomitants) such as:
  - $r$  happiness – age
  - $r$  happiness – income

The list of variables is available on the website

### **Data file**

The data are stored in an SPSS-file (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This file is free available on request.

**Link:** [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap\\_cor/cor\\_fp.htm](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/hap_cor/cor_fp.htm)

## 3.7 Data file ‘Trends in Nations’

### **Aim:**

- To facilitate cross-temporal analysis of happiness in nations

### **Scope:**

- Nations in which the distribution of happiness is assessed by means of general population surveys
- Using comparable measures of happiness over a period of at least 25 years

### **Coverage 1-7-2009:**

- 16 nations
- 1945-2008

### **Variables:**

- Average happiness
- Happy Life Years
- Inequality of happiness
- Inequality-Adjusted happiness
- Life expectancy

The list of variables is available on the website

### **Data file**

The data are stored in an SPSS-file (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This file is free available on request.

**Link:** <http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/trendnat/framepage.htm>

## 4 How you can add to this database

This database has been built up since the 1980s with the help of many volunteers. To keep it up to date we need the support of the research field.

### 4.1 Submit your findings

If you deem your work relevant, please send us a copy. 'Grey' papers are also welcomed.

- All scientific work on subjective appreciation of life-as-a-whole will be included in the bibliography.
- Results of empirical work will also be summarized in the Finding Collections, provided that the measures of happiness used fit our validity demands.
- Not all the work eligible is entered at the moment. About 500 reports wait for extraction
- You can speed up inclusion of your work if you enter the results on an electronic form. That form can be downloaded from the website

**Send to:** Prof. Ruut Veenhoven, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, POB 1738, NL 3000DR Rotterdam, Netherlands, Tel: + 31 10 408 2102, Fax: + 31 10 408 9098, E-mail: [veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl)

### 4.2 Be a country correspondent

We cannot trace all findings on happiness in all countries of the world. So we welcome the support of local scholars who have a better view on the research in their country. The task is to enter publications on happiness in the Bibliography and to help entering research results in the Finding Collections. Your name will be mentioned in the list of correspondents and on the country report.

### 4.3 Be a subject correspondent

We cannot keep pace with the growing stream of research on happiness, in particular not with the growing amount of correlational findings. Hence we welcome the support of specialists on particular subjects, who follow the literature anyway. For instance a specialist on the happiness-income relationship and a specialist on the link between happiness and health. Your task will be to enter relevant publications in the Bibliography and to enter the outcomes in the collection of Correlational Findings. Your name will be on the list of correspondents and on top of the Finding Report on this subject.

#### 4.4 Participate in the Happiness Scale Interval Study

Comparability of the available research findings on happiness is greatly limited by heterogeneity of survey questions on happiness. Main sources of variation are the number of response options (e.g. 3-step or 7-step) and the words used as labels (e.g. 'very happy' and 'pretty happy'). For that reason we estimate how much happiness is denoted by such terms, taking into account the context of the question and the language. Native speakers rate the degree of happiness denoted by such terms by indicating an interval on a 0 to 10 numerical scale. They do that on a web based *Scale Interval Recorder*. We use these ratings for transforming the observed responses to these different questions to a common range numerical range of 0 to 10.

An accurate estimate requires about 200 raters, preferably university students. Currently we have covered all the survey questions on happiness ever used in Arabic, Croatian, Dutch, German, Hungarian, Romanian and Russian. Coverage is as yet incomplete in English, Japanese and Spanish and we lack studies in all other languages. You are welcome as a co-investigator in this project. More information is available at [http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/scalestudy/scale\\_fp.htm](http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/scalestudy/scale_fp.htm)

#### 4.5 Make a donation

It is difficult to keep this database up to date. The stream of research on happiness is growing while our capacity remains limited. At this moment the findings of some 500 studies on happiness are waiting to be entered in the database and the waiting list is growing every day. Hence we welcome financial support. With some extra money we can hire smart students who can help us to keep this database up to date.

All scientific work on subjective appreciation of life-as-a-whole will be included in the bibliography.

- Donations can be made to the ***Support Fund for the World Database of Happiness*** that is administered by Erasmus University's Trustfund.
- You can transfer a donation to the 'Vereniging Trustfonds EUR', in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The international bank account number is: **IBAN NL15 FTSB 0255 4036 07**. Please specify: "in favour of the Happiness-Fund".
- You can also remember the Fund in your **last will**
- The Happiness fund is a recognized charity and donations to this fund are therefore tax deductible

## 5 Ordering

### Files in Ms-Access

- The full database is available on CD-ROM. Price: € 25, --

### Searches

- On your request we can do searches on the databases and send selected printouts or files.
- Price: € 25, -- per hour work, minimum charge € 25, --.

### Paper copies

- On your request we can copy papers available in our archive and send you by mail. Most of the papers mentioned in the Bibliography of Happiness are in the archive.
- Price € 0,10 per page, minimum charge € 10, --.

### Order address

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Tel: + 31 10 408 2102, Fax: + 31 10 408 9098

E-mail: [veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:veenhoven@fsw.eur.nl)

### Payment

Together with the delivery, we will send you an invoice.

Costs of shipping and money transfer will be added.

## 6 The people behind

### Team at 1-7-2009

Anneke Blok, data entry

Sasqia Blokzijl-Chin Hon Foei (drs.), data entry, data analysis

Cunie Boelhouwer, documentation

Carla den Buitelaar, documentation, text-processing

Maarten Berg (drs.), data analysis

Mark Chekola (professor emeritus), bibliography, philosophy section

Armand Elia, data entry

Ineke Huijsmans (drs), data entry

Wim Kalmijn (ir.), statistics

Hans Mieras (ir.), data entry

Joop Mulder, text processing

Winnie Oostmeijer, documentation

Jan Ott (mr. drs.), data entry, data analysis

Piet Ouweneel (drs.), data-analysis

George VanderPoel (dr.), data-entry

Fredrik Radema (ir), IT

Frank VanderVlugt (ir), data entry

Janna VandeVooren, data entry

Jan VandeVooren (dr. ir), data

Treze VanHecke (mr.), data entry

Ruut Veenhoven (professor emeritus), direction, data analysis

Paul Wartena (drs.), data entry and analysis, website maintenance

Gerard Wildschut, documentation

Ems Zuidgeest (MD), documentation