

Ranking the factors that make for a happy country

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Video Abstract

Keywords: Happiness index, Partial ordering, Indicator importance, Peculiar countries, Weight regimes

Posted Date: November 21st, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-113102/v1>

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Abstract

What leads to happiness? Although the answer largely depends on who's asked, the World Happiness Index aims to more objectively pinpoint these factors. The index, calculated annually, ranks 157 nations in order of their relative levels of happiness. While the score identifies the countries assumed to be happiest, the characteristics of a happy country remain poorly defined. Now, research conducted at the Awareness Center in Denmark has revealed that more than money, health, or social support, the feeling that your native country is doing better than others is key to achieving sustainable bliss. This conclusion draws from a fresh look at the data used to calculate the 2016 World Happiness Index. The index scores seven so-called happiness indicators. The first six include money, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, charitable giving, and perceptions of corruption. The seventh indicator is the feeling of doing better or worse than a hypothetical country called Dystopia – so named because of its low scores on all other indicators. The index is calculated by simply adding the indicators' scores. However, this assumes that the indicators are comparable quantities – that is, it suggests that each is equally important when measuring happiness. This assumption leaves out important information: it doesn't show, for example, whether good health or social support is more strongly tied to a feeling of happiness. To determine the relative importance of each indicator in achieving happiness, the research used a method called partial ordering – a way of looking at relationships between all pairs of elements within a set – to pair off each country and compare their happiness-indicator scores. The results showed that wealth, social support, health, and freedom played only minor roles relative to generosity and corruption. The Dystopia indicator, however, was the most influential. Applying partial ordering led to new average scores for many countries and even served as a tiebreaker for some, providing a more complete picture of their relative happiness. Although no index can capture every component of happiness, this research begins to distinguish the factors most strongly tied to a nation's sense of contentment, and may one day help focus efforts towards improving society's well-being at large.