

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Of all the regions in the world, the Nordic region – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – turns out to be the happiest, based on people’s responses when asked how happy they are. At first this fact seems improbable: The United States is much richer, Portugal has much nicer weather, and it was the French who invented the concept of *joie de vivre* – the joy of living. So how can a region that is situated on the periphery of the inhabited world, which is ice-cold and uncomfortably dark all winter, be one of the nicest places to live? That is the question this book seeks to answer. Throughout its chapters, I will use that question to explore what thirty years of happiness research can tell us, thereby also shedding light on how the Nordics are special.

The starting point of the book is that everyone wants to live a good life. We may have very different definitions of exactly what “a good life” is, and our conceptions of what it ought to be may be utterly wrong. From the Buddhist monk meditating on life, or the gifted high-school student contemplating her career ambitions, to the racing driver dreaming about the perfect lap at Le Mans, the search for fulfillment is common to virtually all human beings. The “pursuit of happiness” is not only written into the US

Declaration of Independence, it is also the main theme of countless books, plays, and songs. Shakespeare's Romeo yearns for his Juliet; Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn seeks adventure on the Mississippi river; and Chekhov's Uncle Vanya strives for happiness, but makes his own life impossible.

Philosophers have spent more than two thousand years pondering this question, and particularly thinking about what "the good life" ought to be. Ever since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle strolled around ancient Athens, and Seneca advised the Roman emperor Nero, most philosophers and social thinkers have, at some point in their careers, thought deeply about what people should do to live a good, happy life – and whether, indeed, anyone can know what other people ought to do. Their attempts have produced great theories and insights, but have also given rise to a veritable flood of self-help books. Yet this book is emphatically *not* about the philosophy of happiness – so it is *not* about how other people believe we ought to lead our lives to make the most of them.

Instead, it is about why some people are happier than others, and particularly why the inhabitants of the Nordic countries, on average, are happier than almost anyone else in the world. Throughout the book, the answers given to these questions rest on recent research in a field of scientific inquiry that has become known as "happiness studies." This field is multidisciplinary, and scholars from anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science all contribute regularly to its development. The field even has its own prestigious journal – the *Journal of Happiness Studies* – where researchers share their new findings. Its multidisciplinary nature is so palpable that it is often impossible to tell whether an article was written by a psychologist, an economist, or a political scientist, because they share the same questions, the same survey data, and often even the same methods. In the fol-

lowing, therefore, I ignore the boundaries between these fields and simply cover insights from happiness studies. These insights provide a number of pieces to the puzzle of why some people are happier than others, and why the Nordic peoples are the happiest of all.

The purpose of this book first requires us to define what we are talking about, and to address the problem that most languages use one word – being “happy” – to describe two quite different phenomena. Making this distinction also involves knowing how happiness can be measured, and in which parts of the world people are happiest. Throughout the rest of the book, I will use the data and measures from large international surveys, described in detail later, to illustrate what makes people happy – and what, surprisingly, does not – as well as how the Nordics differ from the rest of the world. In other words, the book rests on the *empirical* literature on happiness that is based on people’s answers to questions about happiness and life satisfaction.

However, before moving on to the many insights I can share about the elusively happy Nordics, I need to divulge the first big surprise in happiness research: Even though people live under extremely different conditions in more than 200 countries and on continents that are far apart, they are all still human beings, which makes them surprisingly similar. The same fundamental factors are important to the happiness of a couple of about the same age in Ghana, Denmark, and Peru. As you read the rest of this book, please keep this in mind: People have very different tastes and norms, but they still share the same basic hopes, needs, and aspirations, no matter where they live.

Before I move on to confirming some of the existing “folk theory” – the commonly held beliefs about what ought to make people happy – and destroying other strongly held beliefs about what “the good life” is, it is important to ask readers to let go of their own folk theory and

keep an open mind throughout the book. People who plan their lives based on such sayings may be doing themselves a great disservice. To know what is up and down in these discussions, we first need to know what we are talking about. The next chapter therefore deals with what happiness is, and what we are measuring. Subsequent chapters explore what we know about the effects of a number of different things on how happy and satisfied people are: the big things in life, such as marriage, children, age, and one's job, income, and wealth, as well as trust and institutions, and freedom and tolerance.

Throughout the book, I compare international survey evidence from the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – with three other regions of the world: the rest of what is commonly known as the Western world, the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. While the book tells the broader story of why some people are happier than others, these comparisons serve to highlight how, and how much, the Nordics actually differ from the rest of the world. With all this in mind, the last chapter summarizes how, despite all the human commonalities, the Nordics are, nevertheless, a region that stands out.

Chapter 2.

What is happiness?

It is easy to get the impression that there are many profound maxims about happiness and how to become happy. Mark Twain is sometimes credited with saying that “Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination.” Similarly, a Danish film evergreen from 1937, still played and sung today, asks why happiness is so fickle, and why joy doesn’t last – although most of the proverbs, sayings, and self-help slogans around the world convey a more positive message. However, the question much of the scientific happiness literature really asks is this: Do these proverbs and sayings reveal people’s experiences, or do they reflect what people think ought to have made them happy?

The proverbs express what is often called “folk theory,” which is made up of people’s shared beliefs and ideas about what makes “the good life.” Many people say, for example, that money *won’t* make you happy, but as we shall see in Chapter 4, which is about income, this is actually not true. Folk theory also says that children, peace and quiet, respect for traditions, and not wanting too much will contribute to a person’s happiness, and it also emphasizes family and friendship. Much of the recent self-help literature tries to make people feel satisfied with what they already have, and focus on some balance or other in their

lives. In certain places in the world, the idea of a harmonious balance between different elements is important in people's norms and conceptions of the good life. Harmony, for example, plays a major role in Asian philosophies of the good or virtuous life, and a Finnish proverb says that "happiness is a place between too little and too much." The versatile Swedish word *lagom* – which is an adverb, an adjective, and a noun – even expresses this blissful point between too much and too little: *Lagom* is when something is like the perfect porridge in the fairytale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, which was *just* the right temperature.

The word *lagom* has been used to explain why the Nordics are so happy – because people strike just the right balance – but it is worth noting that neither the expression nor the word has a counterpart in Danish, Icelandic, or Norwegian. Similarly, both folk theory and social norms about what is "socially acceptable" in life vary across different cultures and countries. They can also change dramatically over time, as the example of gender norms shows: Very few Europeans today would accept the norms that constrained women's life decisions in the 1930s, just as very few Europeans would personally accept the religious norms of contemporary Iran, or the strict family structures in parts of Africa. As such, many of our norms, traditions, and even long-held conceptions of what the good life ought to be can be powerfully misleading.

The two types of happiness

One of the main challenges is that in virtually all languages, people use the word "happy" to describe two quite different phenomena: immediate sensations of great joy and contentment, and a broader and long-lasting state of satisfaction and well-being in daily life. We say that we are happy when we experience a brief burst of great joy, and we may also say that we have a happy life, but for quite different reasons. One of these concepts is a short-

lived phenomenon, while the other is a more thoroughly considered long-run assessment of how we experience our lives in the broader perspective.

Brief bursts of happiness can be caused by many things. Imagine a Christmas gift you have been dreaming of all December, or remember that special moment your beloved said “Yes!” when you proposed, or the day your first child was born, or the Sunday the New England Patriots won the Superbowl. Most of us experience such moments and remember them vividly; they are the short-lived version of happiness, or what many psychologists prefer to call “positive affect” (Kuppens, Realo, & Diener 2008). This is the feeling of your brain rewarding you for behavior that is either good for you personally or good for the survival of the human species. Conversely, we all know what the reverse feels like – when your home team loses a crucial qualifying match (again) or when you just miss the last train home, not to mention the seemingly endless limbo in an airport when your flight has been cancelled. Psychologists often prefer to call such experiences “negative affect” to separate them from more lasting feelings of misery, as in the case of grief or depression, for example.

“Positive affect” describes the experiences of happiness we often refer to as “fickle” – inconstant and unpredictable – but fortunately, the same applies to their reverse. We have several expressions for this sort of happiness, and its opposite, which one often sees in the literature. “Positive affect” is only one expression; “euphoria” and “dopamine happiness” are also in common use, because dopamine and other similar neurotransmitters are released in the human brain’s reward center, known as the *nucleus accumbens*, in such situations. This center functions like a dog that wags its tail when it is happy: It is jubilant when we do something it perceives as good, but it becomes despondent when we do something it perceives as bad. Dopamine happiness, positive affect, or euphoric

emotions are what we sometimes see manifested very clearly in teenagers. Their affect can rapidly shift from positive to negative, their mood changing dramatically. A teenager can feel miserable at breakfast, joyful at lunch, and utterly indifferent at the dinner table.

The other type of happiness is very different from the brief ups and downs in positive and negative affect. To investigate it, researchers look at how happy we are between life's mental Kodak moments: How happy are we in our daily lives? This is often referred to as "everyday happiness," "wedded bliss," or "bread-and-butter happiness" by popular journalists and lifestyle writers. Researchers in the field instead prefer to call it "subjective well-being" when exploring how people perceive their lives as a whole.

Although the neurobiological foundation of subjective well-being is far less developed than our understanding of affect, people's long-run assessments of their lives are known to be associated with a center in the brain called the prefrontal cortex. The *nucleus accumbens*, which is associated with affect or short-lived happiness, is a very old part of the brain in evolutionary terms. The prefrontal cortex, on the other hand, is a relatively young part of the brain; very few animals show development in this area, besides human beings. Long-term happiness is, in other words, fundamentally different from short-lived affect.

In this book, I therefore draw a sharp distinction between these two phenomena, as the general meaning of "being happy" during events or moments that make us intensely happy and the broader feeling that "our life as a whole is a happy one" are completely different. We risk deceiving ourselves when using a single word – "happy" – to describe these two distinct phenomena. I would also like to emphasize that the focus in the rest of the book is on the long-term variety of happiness – our subjective well-being.