

# QUALITY-OF-LIFE IN INDIVIDUALISTIC SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

## A comparison of 43 nations in the early 1990's

Ruut Veenhoven

*Published in: Social Indicators Research, 1999 vol. 48, pp 157-186*

(This paper was awarded the prize for best article in Social Indicators Research in 1999 by the International Association for Quality of Life Studies)

### **SUMMARY**

*In the process of modernization, western societies became more individualistic. Ever since there have been claims that this development will create an unlivable society. Humans would need a Gemeinschaft and would wither in Gesellschaft. This classic idea lives in present day 'communitarism' and inspires pleas for the strengthening of moral bonds and preserving the welfare state.*

*This paper reports an empirical test of the claim that quality-of-life is poor in individualized society. It compares 43 nations in the early 1990's. Individualization is measured by three aspects: 1) moral appreciation of individualism, 2) opportunity to choose, and 3) capability to choose. Next overall individualization is measured by means of an expert-estimate. Quality-of-life in nations is measured by the citizen's subjective appreciation of life as assessed in representative surveys.*

*The data show a clear positive relationship, the more individualized the nation, the more citizens enjoy their life. This suggests that the benefits of individualization are greater than its costs.*

*Inspection of the scattergrams shows a linear relationship. There is no pattern of diminishing returns. This indicates that individualization has not yet passed its optimum.*

*The relationship appears to be contingent to level of education and economic prosperity. Positive correlations appear only among the most knowledgeable and prosperous nations. This suggests that the misgivings about individualization apply more to the past than to the future.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the process of modernization, western societies became ever more individualistic. At the individual level this involved both greater awareness of one's own preferences and greater ability to act independently. At the societal level individualization involves greater freedom and a change in social regulation from normative prescription to negotiation<sup>2</sup>. These developments are linked to several other modernization processes, such as growing division of labor, extension of youth and expanding education.

There is a rich literature on the *nature* of individualism and on the *determinants* of the individualization process (o.a. Triandis 1990). This paper is about the *consequences* of individualism, in particular about its consequences for the quality-of-life.

### 1.1 Presumed consequences of individualism for quality-of-life

Opinions on the consequences of individualism differ widely. Some see it as a liberation from archaic restrictions that long inhibited self-actualization. Others observe social decay in the first place and see that result in isolation and anomie.

The positive view holds that people thrive well in autonomy. It also assumes that concurrent choice of self-seeking individuals will produce good outcomes for everybody. This view has a long tradition in liberal thought. The underlying view of human nature is positive. Man is seen as capable to control his own lot.

The negative view is that individualism entails unscrupulous competition and atomistic self-containment. As such, individualization would result in alienation from society, and ultimately from oneself. This view has a long tradition in conservative thought. The underlying view of human nature is reserved, if not negative. Man is seen as basically dependant.

Over the years these views have manifested in different shapes. Currently, the positive view is embodied in 'neo-liberalist' creed, while the negative view is part of the 'communitarist' counter-movement.

At this moment, communitarists have taken the offense. For instance, Etzioni (1993) argues that the surge in individual rights conflicts with the needs of community. Individualism would destruct vital institutions such as family and neighborhood, and thereby create misery. Etzioni pleads for a 're-invention of society'. Another spokesman is Lane (1994). Lane sees an unholy alliance of individualism and market, which would destroy trust and friendship. He notes growing mass dysphoria. These views echo 19th century concern about shift from pre-modern 'Gemeinschaft' to industrial 'Gesellschaft' (Tönnies 1887).

Communitarist assertions are criticized on several grounds. One objection is that the society they want to rebuild never existed. In this line, Phillips (1993) inspected the Gemeinschaft features of the most celebrated examples, early Greek society, medieval European society and 18th century American society. He observed much dissent, distrust and particularism. Another objection is that human needs for community may be less pressing than presumed. Maryanski & Turner (1992) agree that humans have no herd-instinct, but are rather characterized by a preference for 'weak-ties'<sup>3</sup>. Lastly, it is objected that individualism goes with amoral selfishness. Waterman argues that individualistic society encourages the development of identity, self-esteem and self-actualization. He provides ample evidence that these characteristics

foster pro-social behaviors, such as intimacy, helping, social involvement and moral responsibility (Waterman 1984).

Views on the consequences of individualization have clashed ever since the onset of modernization. Sometimes one was more popular than the other, depending on the swings in public attention and the Zeitgeist. Yet none of the two views ever gained dominance. The discussion is still going on and is still undecided.

## 1.2 Earlier research on consequences of individualization for quality-of-life

In spite of much theorizing, there is not so much empirical research on the consequences of individualization for the quality-of-life. In the available studies, individualisation is seldom measured as such. Commonly, it is assumed to be implied in modernization and 'measured' by manifestations of that, such as urbanization and industrialization. Quality-of-life is typically equated with absence of specific miseries. Common measures are incidence of deviant behaviors (such as homicide, alcoholism and suicide) and psycho-pathology (as measured by incidence of depression or admissions to mental hospitals).

The available studies involve three kinds of comparisons. Firstly there are studies that compare across societies. For instance: Naroll compares quality-of-life in modern and pre-industrial society. He assumes that the latter societies are less individualized than the former. Secondly, there are comparisons through time within nations. For instance, Lane (1994) compares quality-of-life in past and present USA. He assumes that present American society is more individualized. Lastly, there are studies that compare institutional segments within society. Examples are comparisons of quality-of-life in rural and urban settings (where urban life is assumed to be more individualistic) and studies of quality-of-life in workconditions that allow more and less autonomy<sup>4</sup>.

The results of these studies are contradictory. Their methodology is disputable on several grounds.

### *Contradictory findings*

Several cross-cultural comparisons suggest that deviant behavior and psycho-pathology are more typical of industrialized nations than of traditional society. On that basis it is concluded that individualization works out negatively. For instance, Naroll (1983) claims that close knit pre-modern societies have low rates of homicide, suicide, delinquency, divorce, child abuse and wife-beating and are characterized by good mental health. Likewise, Waldron et al (1982) observe better (lower) blood-pressure in pre-modern societies, in particular in hunter-gatherer communities<sup>5</sup>. In the same line, a lot of studies suggest that mental disturbance is more frequent in modern western society. For example, Jenkins et al (1991) claim that depression is more common in Westernized cultures.

These assertions are not unchallenged however. For instance, Edgerton (1992) exposes Naroll's tale of aboriginal harmony. He shows convincingly that many primitive societies are haunted by continuous feuds, rigid structures and blatant ignorance. Life is hard in such societies and mostly quite short, even in ecologically favorable circumstances. Likewise, careful examination of the available evidence failed to show that modern society creates more mental disturbance. Even depression does not appear to be more frequent in modern societies. At best there are indications that mental disturbances manifest somewhat differently in modern society

(a.o. less somatization) and that its social consequences are not quite the same (f.e. more isolation). See Draguns (1990) for a review.

Cross temporal studies have yielded different conclusions as well. On one hand there is a longstanding tradition of social indicator research that documents increasing rates of homicide, divorce and suicide in modernizing (individualizing) societies. These trends are interpreted as manifestations of growing despair and interpreted in an Durheimian perspective of disruptive anomie. An example is Seligman's (1988) claim that Americans born after 1945 are 10 times more likely to suffer depression than people born 50 years earlier. Seligman attributes that change to "individualism" which "erodes commitments to others".

Yet much of these claims about declining quality-of-life are contested on methodological grounds. For instance, the alleged rise in depression among American youth has been discounted as an artefact of greater awareness and better registration. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence of great improvements over time. For instance, nutrition, housing and medical care ameliorated enormously over the last century. This resulted in an unprecedented rise in life-expectancy and a positive appreciation of life. See Inkeles (1960, 1993) for a review.

Likewise, comparisons between more and less individualized segments within societies have yielded contradictory findings. For instance, several studies observe greater incidence of crime and divorce in urban (individualized) areas than in rural parts of modern societies. Yet urban dwellers appear to be no less happy or healthy (Fisher 1973, Veenhoven 1994), and despite the widely proclaimed failings of urban life people keep migrating from the country to towns and cities.

Similar dissimilarities appear in studies on autonomy in institutional settings such as marriage, school and work. For instance, divorce is more common in modern (individualized) marriage than in traditional marriage, but modern marriage appears to be more affectionate and satisfying (Straver et al 1994).

#### *Methodic weaknesses*

These inconsistencies in conclusions are largely due to the methodological weaknesses. The variables at stake are not adequately measured and interpretations are disputable.

*Poor measurement* Individualization is not adequately measured by 'economic development' or 'urbanization'. Though these features may be statistically related to individualization, they represent something else, that may relate differently to quality-of-life. The same holds for other proxy's, such as 'education' or the number of 'one person households'<sup>6</sup>.

Measurement of the dependant variable is unsatisfactory as well. Quality-of-life in society is not adequately measured by incidence of mischief. The concept of quality reflects a balance of costs and benefits, and one cannot assess that balance by counting costs only. Good measures must involve benefits as well. Possibly individualized society produces more of both. Still another thing is that current measures count costs rather selectively. The focus is very much on salient deviant behaviors like aggression and addiction, and neglect silent sufferings of ennui and conformity.

*Disputable interpretations* Even if good measures would show lower quality-of-life in individualized societies, there is still the question whether this is a temporary phenomenon or a lasting lack. One may have observed the short term costs of transition, rather than its long term

revenues. Most studies in this tradition do not allow a distinction between recent and seasoned individualization.

Another interpretation problem is in causation. Deviance and despair may be more frequent in big cities, but that does not mean that urban society is less livable. It is also possible that cities attract more unconventional and disturbed people. These people may flourish better in urban society, even though they still do not live without problems.

A further weakness is in the analysis. Typically the focus is on demonstrating that more modernization (individualization) goes with less quality-of-life. Investigators look for significant differences. Fixation on matters of difference blinds to questions of degree. Hardly any empirical study has tried to assess whether medium levels of individualization might be optimal.

Another analytical flaw is the implicit assumption that the effects of individualization tend to be same in all conditions. Tough contingencies are often suggested in the theoretical literature, they are typically absent in empirical studies.

### *Approach of this study*

The study reported in this paper tries to overcome these problems. It involves measures of individualization as such rather than proxy's of it. The study involves also a comprehensive measure of quality-of-life (happiness) that reflects the balance of costs and benefits, rather than counting specific miseries.

The study compares across countries rather than within countries. This greatly reduces the problem of selective migration. As the number of countries is quite sizable it allows inspection of the shape of the relationship and exploration of contingencies.

## **2 METHOD**

### **2.1 Measures of individualization of society**

Individualization manifests in social relationships as well as individual thinking and behavior. It is not easy to measure the matter in all its facets, certainly not comparatively. This study measures individualization in two ways, by aspect measures and by an overall estimate.

#### **2.1.1 Aspect indicators of individualization**

Four aspect measures are used here 1) endorsement of individualist values, 2) freedom of choice, 3) capability of citizens to handle these opportunities, and 4) perceived freedom and control in life.

#### *Adherence to individualist values*

Value preference can be measured by survey questions. Several value-surveys involve questions about adherence of individualist values in nations. One such survey is Hofstede's (1991) famous comparative investigation of work-values among IBM-employees. Another is Schwartz's (1994) international survey of terminal values among teachers. In this study Hofstede's data are used in the first place, because they cover most nations. Several of his value-scores were condensed in one factor.

#### *Opportunity to choose*

Free choice requires first of all that there is something to choose, in other words that society provides diversity in ways of life. Unfortunately there are no comparable measures of life-style

assortment in nations. At best we could use economic affluence as a proxy. The next requirement is that choice is not blocked, in other words that there is 'negative freedom'<sup>7</sup> in society. Restriction to choice can be measured reasonably well. Recently several cross-national indicators have become available, on freedom in political life, economic life and personal life.

*Political freedom* in nations is measured by the degree to which civil rights are held in respect and to what extent democracy works. These matter are monitored since the 1970's, firstly by Gastil (1987) and currently by Freedom House. Respect for rights is assessed by means of inquiries among experts, which consider both legislation and practice on 11 dimensions. Results are now reported every year and are currently available for 182 nations (Karantnycky et al 1995). Here both civil rights and political rights are condensed in one sumscore.

*Economic freedom* is monitored since the 1970's as well. It measured by four aspects: security of the money one has (4 items), freedom to produce and consume what one wants (6 items), freedom to keep what one earns (3 items) and freedom of exchange (4 items). Economic freedom is assessed regularly by the Fraser Institute. Data is now available for 114 nations (Gwartney 1995). Below we will use a sumscore.

*Personal freedom* is not yet monitored systematically. So I gathered some indicators myself. Personal freedom can be measured by opportunities for choice in private matters, such as marriage, procreation, sex and life-termination. Choice in these matters is limited by both officially and informally. Official limits are in restrictive legislation and its enforcement. Informal (but no less limiting) restrictions are in social disapproval of ways of life. Data on official restrictions is scarce. Only about freedom of abortion and contraception do we have sufficient comparable figures. Data on informal social control is more abundant. The World Values Survey provides good information on that matter in 42 nations. The survey includes items on acceptance of divorce, abortion, sterilization, homo-sexuality, prostitution, suicide and euthanasia. Again, the the various items are condensed in one factor.

All these indicators of freedom are combined in one factor called 'opportunity to choose'<sup>8</sup>

#### *Capability to choose*

Self-destination requires not only will to choose and absence of restrictions (negative freedom), but also capability to choose (positive freedom). Capability to choose involves both awareness of alternatives and guts to choose<sup>9</sup>.

*Awareness of alternatives* There are no comparable survey data on awareness of life-style options in nations. Yet there is good data on education and information in nations, which can serve as a proxy<sup>10</sup> 'Education' is measured by adult literacy and by school-enrolment. 'Information' is measured by media-attendance (circulation of newspapers and number of television receivers p/c). Data on these matters is found in the Human Development Report 1995. This information is condensed in a factor called 'capability to choose'.

*Guts to choose* Measuring 'guts to choose' would require data on national character (modal personality), in particular data on psychological independence, determination and stress-tolerance. Such data is not available for a sufficient number of nations. Hence this variable is not included in this study.

### *Perceived freedom and control*

Actual freedom is likely to manifest in perceived freedom, though it does not necessarily so. Data on perceived freedom in nations is available from the World Values Survey as well. The standard questionnaire contains two items: perceived freedom and control in life (item 95) and perceived freedom at work (item 117). Both items are condensed in a 'perceived freedom' factor.

#### **2.1.2 Overall estimate of individualization**

Next to these aspect-measures of individualization I also included an overall estimate. This is Triandis' expert-estimate of individualization in nations. Triandis is a leading specialist in cross-cultural psychology. He rated 55 present day nations on a 7 step scale ranging from 'collectivist' to 'individualist' (Diener 1995:856). His rating involves probably also the psychological dimension (guts to choose) of which we found no separate indicators.

#### **2.1.3 Inter-correlation of indicators of individualism**

All these five indicators have considerable face-validity. Still one may doubt that they really measure individualization in nations adequately. It is not possible to assess more precisely what these indicators measure, but we can at least establish to what extent they measure the same. This is called congruent validity testing.

**Scheme 1** presents inter-correlations between the five indicators of individualization in nations. All the correlations are positive.

The correlations among the first three aspect indicators (valuation, opportunity, capacity) and the overall estimate (expert rating) are high and significant. This suggests good validity.

The correlations with self perceived freedom are less high and partly insignificant. Inspection of the scattergrams reveals that in Latin-America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico) people feel almost equally free as in Western-Europe, whereas these nations are otherwise less individualized<sup>11</sup>. For that reason this indicator is dropped.

Data on the four remaining indicators of individualization of nations is presented in the appendix.

## **2.2 Measure of quality-of-life in nations**

The term 'quality-of-life in nations' is currently used in two meanings. One connotation is the extent to which nations provide conditions deemed good for people, such as economic prosperity and political stability. The other meaning is how well citizens thrive actually. These meanings are often equated. If living-conditions in the country are regarded good, its citizens are supposed to prosper. Yet, beliefs about the good life do not always fit human reality. Some ideals are simply unlivable. History has witnessed many 'ideal' societies in which people pined away. So, these two meanings of quality-of-life must be kept apart. I refer to these variants as respectively 'assumed' and 'apparent' quality-of-life. The distinction is worked out in more detail in Veenhoven (1996b: 9-13).

### **2.2.1 Focus on 'apparent' quality-of-life**

In the discussion on the merits of individualization, the term quality-of-life is often used in the first sense of 'assumed' quality-of-life. A typical reasoning is then that community is good for people and that quality-of-life is thus better in nations with strong communities. This is a circular argument, which does not bring us any further. Neither does the opposite argumentation,

which assumes that self-determination is good for people, and concludes on that basis that individualized society provides the best quality-of-life.

Conceptions of 'assumed quality-of-life' can be used only in this discussion if the assumptions concern something else than individualism, for instance if the attribute deemed good is 'peace' or 'understanding'. Yet in that case, the discussion narrows to fairly specific consequences of individualism, which leads away from the broader question at stake.

To avoid any preconception about the good life, this study focusses on 'apparent' quality-of-life. It investigates how well people flourish actually, and whether they flourish better in good old collectivist *Gemeinschaft* than in modern individualist *Gesellschaft*. The focus is on effects of individualism on human thriving as such. Not on the consequences of individualization that might affect human thriving indirectly.

### 2.2.2 *Measured by average appreciation-of-life in nations*

Apparent quality-of-life in nations can be measured by the degree to which citizens take pleasure in life, in other words: by their happiness. Elsewhere I have discussed the possible measures of apparent quality-of-life in more detail (Veenhoven 1996b). Subjective appreciation-of-life can be measured by direct questions. Such questions have been asked in representative surveys in many countries. Average appreciation-of-life can be computed from the responses.

#### *Validity of data*

There are qualms about the validity of survey assessed appreciation-of-life. It is doubted that responses to questions on happiness really reflect how much the respondent enjoys his/her life, and there are reservations about the comparability of responses across nations. Elsewhere I have examined these misgivings in much detail (Veenhoven 1984, 1993, 1996b).

*Assesibility* I began with subjecting the various questions to a test for face-validity. Many items and scales failed that test. The questions that clearly refer to the overall appreciation of one's life-as-a-whole were inspected in more detail.

On the basis of the data yielded with these questions I checked the various claims about misinterpretation and response distortion. None of these misgivings was supported by the data (Veenhoven 1984: chapter 3). Later validity studies have not shown otherwise (f.e. Saris et al 1996).

The research literature on this point can be summarized by saying that simple questions on happiness and life-satisfaction measure subjective appreciation of life quite validly, but not very reliably<sup>12</sup>.

*Comparability* Reservations about the cross-cultural comparability of happiness rest on theoretical and methodological grounds.

A common theoretical objection is that appreciation of life depends on comparison within countries, and can for that reason not be compared across countries. A related qualm is that appreciation of life depends on culture specific standards of success, which have no relevance in different value contexts. These objections are implied in the 'social reference theory' of satisfaction. Elsewhere I have argued that this theory may apply to satisfaction with specific life-domains, such as satisfaction with income, but does not apply to satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. In appraising their life-as-a-whole, people judge in much the same way as in assessing their physical health. They 'infer' it from inner affective signals, rather than 'calculate' on the basis of external comparison (Veenhoven 1989, 1995, 1996a).



Another theoretical objection is that appreciation of life results from colored outlook-on-life rather than real quality-of-life. In this view, people can be satisfied in poor conditions, if culture emphasizes the good side of things, and dissatisfied in good conditions where cynical views prevail. Elsewhere I have argued that the underlying 'folklore-theory' of satisfaction does not apply to the overall appraisal of life either. Again this explanation presumes a cognitive calculation, whereas in reality affective inference prevails (Veenhoven 1995, 1996a).

Methodological objections hold that responses to survey questions about appreciation of life do not reflect true appreciation equally well in all countries. Differences in semantics and variations in response styles would render response scores incomparable. Elsewhere I have put several of these doubt to the test. None of them was confirmed. For instance: different keywords (happiness, satisfaction, best-worst possible life) did not produce different rank-orders in average responses to questions about appreciation of life. Non-response did not vary much either. It is minimal in all present day nations (Veenhoven 1993, 1996a).

#### *Availability of data*

During the last decades ever more survey studies have involved acceptable questions on subjective appreciation of life. Next to various national surveys, also several cross-national survey studies. For example: the World Values Survey involves three acceptable indicators (happiness, life-satisfaction and affect-balance) and was held in 42 nations in 1992. The available data on subjective appreciation of life in nations is gathered in the 'World Database of Happiness' (Veenhoven 1996c). Currently, it covers 48 nations in the early 1990's.

The data on happiness used here is presented in the appendix.

## 3 RESULTS

We can now inspect the relationship between individualization and quality-of-life in nations. To that end we will first consider zero-order correlations and next elaborate the relationship step by step.

### 3.1 Zero-order relationship

**Scheme 2** presents the zero-order correlations between the four indicators of individualization and average happiness. All correlations show a positive relationship. The negative signs concern support of collectivist values (power distance, conservatism).

Most correlations are strong and significant. Three correlations are fairly strong but not significant. This is the case with two of the Schwartz values (affective autonomy, intellectual autonomy) and with newspaper circulation. In these cases non-significance is due to the limited number of cases. Only the correlation with literacy is really weak. Probably, this factor does not differentiate sufficiently in this sample of predominantly developed nations.

Whatever the size and significance, all the relationships are in the same direction. The more individualized society, the happier its citizens are.

### 3.2 Shape of the relationship

Correlations tell only half the story. [Scheme 3](#) presents the scattergram of estimated overall individualization and happiness.

In this scattergram one cannot see a convex pattern. There is no leveling off of the regression line in the upper-right, and certainly not a bend down. The linear regression fits the data fairly well. The relationships with the other indicators of individualization are linear as well (scattergrams not shown).

This suggests that individualization has not yet reached its ceiling.

### 3.3 Split-up by capability to choose

It is generally assumed that freedom of choice will add to quality-of-life only if accompanied by capability to choose (f.e. Blokland 1997).

This assumption is confirmed in the results of a split-up by capability. [Scheme 4](#) shows indeed little or negative correlation among low capability countries and positive correlations among the high capability nations. Due to the limited number of cases, most correlations are not statistically significant. Still the tendency in the data is consistent.

### 3.4 Control for economic prosperity

The observed statistical relationships could be spurious, and reflect effects of other nation-qualities that happen to be related to individualism. One of these attributes is 'economic affluence'. Individualism is typically higher in the most prosperous nations.

[Scheme 5](#) presents the results of a control. In column 1 we see the zero-order correlations between happiness and the four measures of individualism, which we saw earlier in [scheme 2](#). Column 2 presents the partial correlations that remain when economic affluence is controlled. At first sight, the relationship is wiped out completely. Three of the four correlations are reduced to zero.

Yet at a closer look it appears that this is the result of opposite tendencies that balance out. Split-up reveals negative zero-order correlations among poor countries and positive correlations among rich countries (columns 3 and 4). The pattern persists largely if the remaining differences in affluence within the subgroups of poor and rich countries are controlled (columns 5 and 6). Only the relation with capability does not differentiate in this way.

Again the split-up reduces the number of cases considerably (about 20). Consequently few of the correlations reach statistical significance. Still the pattern of results is suggestive.

In fact we see the same as in the split-up by capability to choose. Possibly for the same reason, because capability (education and information) and affluence overlap to a great extent. It is also possible that economic affluence has an effect of its own. Individualism requires that there is something to choose. If not, it will detract to happiness rather than contribute to it. As noted above, economic development involves greater choice in occupation and consumption. So, like negative freedom, it involves opportunity to choose.

## 4 DISCUSSION

This study set out to test theoretical claims about poor quality-of-life in individualist society with. The test involves new and better measures of both individualization and quality-of-life. We can now conclude that the theory fails that test. The more individualized society, the happier its members appear to be.

This answer raises further questions: One further question is whether the statistical relationship means that individualism breeds happiness. If so, the next question is 'how'. Lastly, the result of this study raises the question why so many eminent scholars believe that quality-of-life is poor in individualistic societies.

#### 4.1 Does individualism add to quality-of-life?

The fact that people tend to be happier in individualistic nations may mean that individualization enhances quality-of-life. Yet it is also possible that causation works the other way. Happiness of citizens could stimulate individualization of society. Various mechanisms might be involved. Happy citizens are probably more tolerant and possibly also more creative and assertive. Elsewhere I have discussed the possible consequences of happiness in more detail (Veenhoven, 1984, 1989). The more sizable such effects of happiness, the smaller the effects of individualization must be. It is even possible that the effect of individualization is negative, but that a small negative effect of individualism on happiness is overshadowed by a stronger positive effect of happiness on individualism.

On the basis of the present data we cannot disentangle these effects. Probably the question can be answered when timeseries become available. For the time being I assume that both effects are involved.

#### 4.2 How could individualism add to quality-of-life?

If we accept *that* individualized society breeds greater happiness than collectivist society, the next question is *how*. A plausible explanation would seem that individualized society fits human nature better than collectivist society does.

That explanation pre-supposes that humans are not fully determined by society (not born as a 'tabula rasa'), but that human nature sets its own demands, which may fit more or less with the supply of society. In this view, we look at society in the way biologists look at the habitat of a species. Biologists see success of species as a matter of fit with their natural environment. The better the match, the more the species thrives. Humans represent a particular flexible species, that can flourish in varied conditions. Still there are limits to human adaptability. We cannot live in all physical conditions and neither can we be happy in all societies. In quality-of-life research this approach is known as 'person-environment fit' theory<sup>13</sup>.

##### *Better chance of 'fit'*

The basic idea of this explanation is that any society sets restrictions to the way its members develop psychologically and to the way they live. This inevitably involves frictions with personal needs and capacities. These frictions gives rise to dysphoric reactions and may harm mental and physical health. Freud (1930) referred to this phenomenon as the "discontents of civilization". Though friction is inherent to organized social life, it is not equally rampant in all societies.

In collectivist society, the person is molded very much to the demands of society. The array of psychological modes is limited (few identities, personality types) and social roles are narrowly defined. In this limited assortment, the individual has little choice. How one develops and what one will do depends very much on ascription. Advantages of that system are easy socialization and social allocation. One of the disadvantages is a high rate of 'misfits'.

Individualistic society allows more variation. Its socialization produces more variation in mental modes. Psychologically, its members develop more different and more differentiated, and over the lifetime they change more. Its social roles are more 'abstract' and leave more room

for negotiation. Role allocation is largely a matter personal choice. An obvious advantage of this system is that people have a better chance of living a life that fits their nature. An equally obvious disadvantage is that choice has its costs.

There are two reasons why chances for fit is likely to be better in individualistic society. One reason is the variation of its life-style assortment. The more variation in ways of life, the greater the chance that the individual finds one that suits his/her needs and capacities. The second reason is that individualistic society is more responsive to (change in) individual demands. The variety of its array facilitates the evolution of new practices, whereas in collectivist societies new life-styles meet strong opposition. The first reason makes that un-average citizens are better served. The second reason reduces the risk that society ignores the needs of the modal citizen.

#### *Why then are there still collectivist societies?*

If individualistic society fits human nature so well, why then is this pattern not universal? One reason seems to be that this type of social organization is not always feasible. Another reason could be that its advantages balance its disadvantages only if specific conditions are met.

*Individualism not always viable* There are good reasons to assume that early human societies allowed a fair amount of freedom. Coercion is difficult in hunter-gatherer bands, where members can leave the group if necessary. Maryanski & Turner believe that the human preference for loose ties evolved in this social context. In their view, success of the species gave rise to scarcity of natural resources, which pressed to another mode of existence, which on its turn gave rise to a more coercive kind of society. Agricultural societies in particular tend to collectivism and become a 'social cage'. Various functional reasons seem to be involved. Though individuals suffer in this system, the quality of their life might even be worse if the social system collapsed. The later shift to industrial society created more room for autonomy. Increasing division of labor enabled a move from 'mechanical solidarity' to 'organic solidarity' (Durkheim 1893) and made individual differences more functional. At the same time the spectacular rise of life-expectancy made investments in differentiated development both more profitable and better possible.

*Individualism not always propitious* Still, individualistic society is no sure ticket for great happiness of a great number. As noted, autonomy has its price. In individualist society, one is confronted with continuous choice. Nothing is self-evident, not even marrying and having children. In choosing one's way of life, one is constantly at risk of making wrong choices. Intimate ties are no longer given by tradition, but things one must establish and maintain.

Successful coping with these problems requires specific capabilities. Opportunity to choose requires capability to choose. Freedom one cannot handle works out negatively on happiness. So, the advantages of individualistic society can be reaped only if the appropriate psychological capabilities are developed. If not, the disadvantages prevail.

There is good empirical evidence for this contingency. Above in [scheme 5](#) we saw it demonstrated at the societal level. The same picture appears in individual level studies on happiness in western nations, which typically show that the most happy people are characterized by such attributes as openness, social sensitivity, emotional stability and autonomy (Veenhoven, 1984, Headey & Wearing 1992). These are typically the proficiencies required in individualist society<sup>14</sup>.

So, individualization will add to the quality-of-life only if the mode of existence permits such social organization, and if socialization develops the necessary capabilities. These requirements seem to be met in the modern nations at hand here.

### 4.3 Why the belief that individualism makes unhappy?

If individualization adds to quality-of-life indeed, why then do so many respectable scholars believe that it is detrimental to it? One reason is in conceptual confusion. Another reason is misreading of reality.

#### *Conceptual confusion*

Many claims about detrimental effects of individualization mix up 'quality of society' with 'quality-of-life in society'. For instance, individualization is seen to reduce respect for tradition (a quality of society) and on that basis it is concluded that individualization reduces the quality-of-life in that society.

A related problem is in the definition of 'quality-of-life'. As noted above, the term is used in two meanings: presence of conditions deemed good for people ('assumed' quality-of-life) and how well people actually thrive ('apparent' quality-of-life). Often these meanings are equated. For example, respect for tradition is assumed to be good for people, and that presumption is extended to the claim that people are happier in traditional society.

Lastly, specific 'qualities of life' are mixed up with 'overall quality of life'. In the same example, it is established that individualization reduces respect for tradition (a specific assumed quality of life) and on that basis it is concluded that individualization decreases overall quality-of-life.

Sloppy thinking is still a vex in sociology.

#### *Misreading of reality*

Still there are scholars who do refer to final 'apparent' quality-of-life, and claim that individualization of society reduced that. Why do they believe so?

One reason seems to be that the costs of individualization are more salient than its benefits. Misery is more visible than happiness. A related point is that it is not easy to assess the balance of effects. For long, there were no good measures of overall quality-of-life. By lack of a better indicator, investigators used incidence of suicide and admissions to psychiatric hospitals, which suggest adverse effects of individualization. Comparable data on happiness are only recently available.

Another ground may be that the balance of effects has probably been less favorable in the past. Firstly, the change towards individualization involved costs of transition. Secondly, the development took place in less favorable conditions: less capability to choose (education and information) and less alternatives to choose (economic development). [Scheme 5](#) showed that the effect on happiness is negative in these conditions. So, in their time, earlier sociologists were possibly right in estimating that individualization is detrimental to the quality-of-life.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Individualization of society adds to the quality-of-life of citizens, at least in present day developed nations. Although life in individualist society is not without problems, the costs of individualism costs are clearly outbalanced by its benefits. There is no support for the claim that individualization has gone too far. Though there is obviously an optimum level, the turning point is not yet in sight.

**Scheme 1**  
**Indicators of individualization in nations**  
**Correlation matrix**

	Endorsement of individualist values	Opportunity to choose	Capability to choose	Perceived freedom and control
<b>Aspect indicators</b>				
Endorsement of individualist values	-			
Opportunity to choose	+.68*	-		
Capability to choose	+.62*	+.69*	-	
Self perceived freedom	+.24	+.34	+.48*	-
<b>Overall estimate</b>				
Expert rating of individualism	+.83*	+.38*	+.67*	+.48*

\* =  $p < .01$

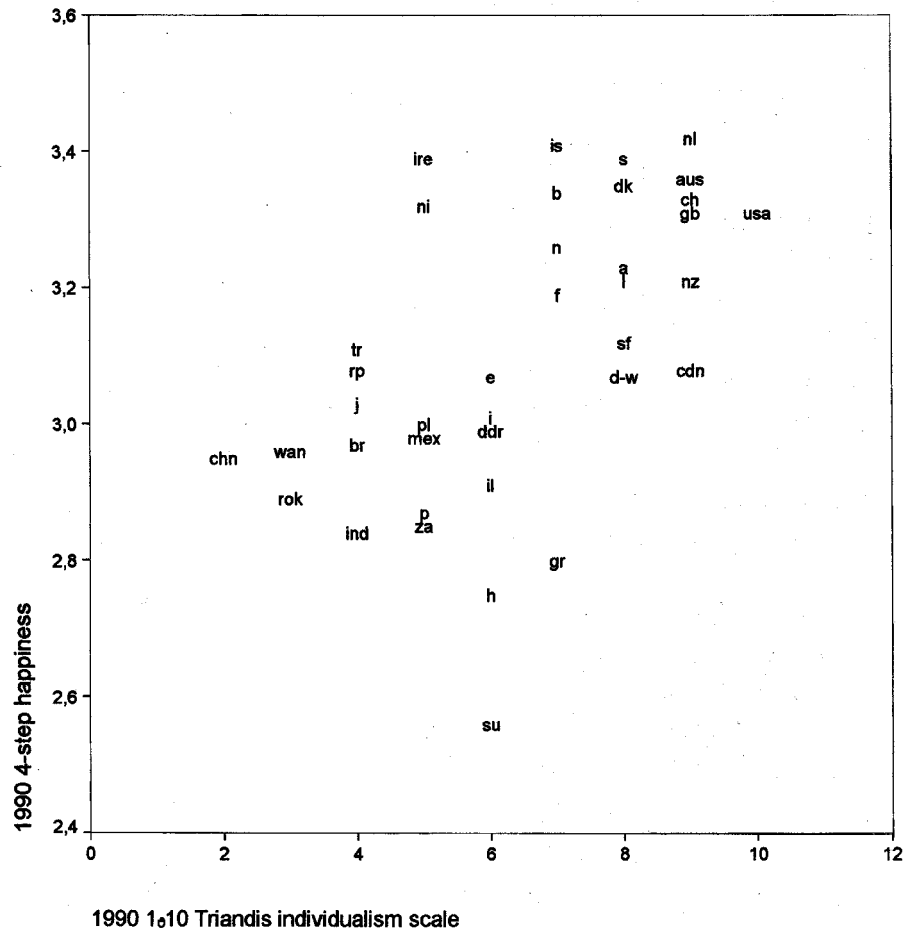
**Scheme 2**  
**Individualization and happiness in 43 nations early 1990's**

<i>Indicators of individualization in nation</i>	<i>correlation with average happiness</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Aspect indicators</i>		
<i>Adherence to individualist values</i>		
Hofstede's work values: opinion IBM employees		
* individualism	+.69*	32
* power distance	— .50*	32
Schwartz's general values: opinion teachers		
* conservatism	— .59*	25
* affective autonomy	+.43	25
* intellectual autonomy	+.35	25
<i>Opportunity to choose (negative freedom)</i>		
Political freedom		
* index of political and civil rights	+.45*	47
Economic freedom:		
* index of economic liberties	+.73*	38
Personal freedom		
* Factor: marriage, sex, procreation, life-termination	+.44*	40
Summed opportunities		
Factor: political + economic + personal freedom	+.57*	31
<i>Capability to choose (positive freedom)</i>		
Education		
* Literacy	+.26	47
* School-enrolment	+.41*	38
Informational diversity		
* Newspaper circulation	+.35	32
* Television receivers	+.39	42
Summed capability		
Factor education + information	+.46*	33
<i>Overall estimate</i>		
Expert rating of individualism (Triandis)	+.55*	38

\* = p<.01

Scheme 3

Chart of individualization and happiness in 38 nations early 1990's





**Scheme 4**  
**Individualization and average happiness in nations**  
**Split-up by capability to choose**

---

<i>Indicators of individualization in nation</i>	<i>correlation with happiness</i>	
	<i>capability to choose</i> <i>(factor education+information)</i>	
	<i>low</i>	<i>high</i>
<hr/>		
<i>Aspect-indicators</i>		
Will to choose: public adherence to individualist work-values	+ .12	+ .55
Opportunity to choose: factor political+economic+personal freedom	— .29	+ .11
 <i>Overall estimate</i>		
Expert rating of individualism in nations	— .04	+ .35

---

**Scheme 5****Individualization and average happiness in 43 nations early 1990's. Control by economic prosperity***Indicators of individualization in nation**correlation with happiness**all nations**poor and rich nations separately**zero order**partial**zero-order correlation**poor rich**partial correlation**poor rich**Aspects of individualism*

Adherence to individualist work-values

+.69\*

+.42

—.23

+.67\*

—.26

+.61\*

Opportunity to choose:  
factor political+economic+personal freedom

+.57\*

+.03

—.17

+.30

—.32

+.22

Capability to choose:  
factor education + information

+.46\*

+.02

—.17

+.28

+.38

+.18

*Overall indicator of individualism*

Expert estimate of individualism

+.55\*

+.05

—.53

+.45

—.28

+.30

\* = p&lt;.01

## Appendix Datamatrix

<i>Nation</i>		<b>Happiness</b>	<b>Individualism</b>			
<i>code</i>	<i>name</i>	scale 1-4	Valuation of autonomy  factor- score	Opportu- nity to choose  Factor- score	Capability to choose  factorscore	Overall estimate  1-10
RA	Argentina*	3,07	-,31	-,96	-,21	
AUS	Australia	3,30	1,16		,32	9
A	Austria	3,20	,93	,38	,80	8
B	Belgium	3,31	,00	,88	,52	7
BR	Brazil	2,94	-1,04	-1,46	-,81	4
GB	Britain	3,28	1,16	,82	,31	9
BG	Bulgaria	2,33		-,81		
CND	Canada	3,05	,77	,97	1,00	9
RCH	Chile*	3,03	-1,27	-,81	-,62	
CHN	China*	2,92				2
CS	Czecho-Slovakia (former)	2,67			-,19	
DK	Denmark	3,36	1,23	,94	,75	8
SF	Finland	3,09	,55	1,61	1,12	8
F	France	3,16	-,18	1,08	,60	7
D,w	Germany (former West-)	3,04	,60	,92		8
DDR	Germany (former East-)	2,96				6
G	Greece	2,77	-,88		-,38	7
H	Hungary	2,72		,06	-,08	6
IS	Iceland	3,38		,21		7
IND	India*	2,81	-1,00	-1,50	-3,52	4

<i>Nation</i>		<b>Happiness</b>	<b>Individualism</b>			
<i>code</i>	<i>name</i>		Valuation of autonomy	Opportu- nity to choose	Capability to choose	Overall estimate
		scale 1-4	factor- score	factor- score.	factorscore	1-10
IRE	Ireland	3,36	,86	-,53	,27	5
IL	Israel	2,88	,85			6
I	Italy	2,98	,43	,02	-,28	6
J	Japan	3,00	-,44	,40	,06	4
L	Luxembourg	3,18			-,72	8
MEX	Mexico	2,95	-1,58	,08	-1,21	5
NI	Northern Ireland	3,29				5
NZ	New Zealand	3,18	1,25		,45	9
NL	Netherlands	3,39	,85	2,25	,70	9
WAN	Nigeria	2,93	-,72	-1,59		3
N	Norway	3,23	,76	,06	,67	7
RP	Philippines	3,08	-1.87		-.71	4
PL	Poland	2,97		-1,13	-,01	5
P	Portugal	2,83	-1.17	-,57	-,75	5
RO	Romania	2,63		-1,22		
SU	Russia	2,53			-,07	6
ZA	South Africa	2,82	,18	-.69		5
ROK	South Korea	2,86	-1,31		-,19	3
E	Spain	3,04	-,39	,03	,36	6
S	Sweden	3,36	,81	,52	,58	8
CH	Switzerland	3,30	,65	1,16	,20	9
TR	Turkey*	3,08	-,99	-1,42	-1,72	4
US	United States of America	3,28	1,07	,33	1,81	10

Data from World Database of Happiness (update 1996), tables 1.1.1a and 1.1.1b. Most of the data from World Value Study 2.

\* Probably too high. Score based on samples in which poor rural population was under-represented

**REFERENCES**

- Bay, C. (1965)  
*The structure of freedom*  
Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, USA
- Blokland, H.T. (1997)  
*Freedom and culture in western society*  
Routledge, London
- Deci, E. & Ryan, R.M. (1985)  
*Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*  
Plenum, New York, USA
- DeJong, M.J. & Zijderfeld, A.C. eds (1997)  
*The gift of society*  
Enzo Press, Nijkerk, The Netherlands
- Diener, E., Diener, M. & Diener, C. (1995)  
*Factors predicting subjective well-being in nations*  
Journal of personality and social psychology, vol 69, pp 851-864
- Draguns, J.G. (1990)  
*Normal and abnormal behavior in cross-cultural perspective: specifying the nature of their relationship.*  
in: Berman, J.J. (ed) Cross-cultural perspectives. Nebraska symposium on motivation 1989.  
University of Nebraska Press, London, UK.
- Durkheim, E. (1893)  
*De la division du travail social. Etude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures.*  
Alcan, Paris, France
- Etzioni, A. (1993)  
*The spirit of community. The reinvention of American society.*  
Simon & Schuster, New York, USA
- Edgerton, R.B. (1992)  
*Sick societies. Challenging the myth of primitive harmony.*  
The Free Press, New York
- Fisher, C. (1973)  
*Urban malaise*  
Social Forces, vol 52, pp 221-235
- French, J.R.P., Rodgers, W.L. & Cobb, S. (1974)  
*Adjustment as person-environment fit*  
in: G. Coelho et al (eds) 'Coping and Adaptation', Basic Books, New York, USA

Freud, S. (1930)

*Civilization and its discontents*

translation by j. Strachey, Norton, 1961, New York, USA

Gastril, R.D. (1987)

*Freedom in the world. Political rights and civil liberties 1986-1987*

Greenwood press, New York

Gwartney, J.D. (1995)

*Economic Freedom in the world 1975-1995*

Fraser Institute, Vancouver BC, Canada

Headey, B. & Wearing, A. (1992)

*Understanding happiness. A theory of subjective well-being.*

Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, Australia

Hofstede, G. (1991)

*Cultures and organizations, software of the mind*

HarperCollins, London

ILO (1996)

*The costs of social security: 14th international inquiry 1987-89*

International Labor Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

Inkeles, A. (1960)

*Industrial man*

American Journal of sociology, vol 66, pp 1-31

Inkeles, A. (1993)

*Industrialization, modernization and the quality-of-life*

International Journal of Comparative Sociology, vol 34, pp 1-23

Jenkins, J.H., Kleinman, A. & Good, B. (1991)

*Cross-cultural studies of depression*

in: Becker, J. & Kleinman, A. (eds) 'Psycho-social aspects of depression'

Erlbaum, Hillsdale NJ USA

Karantnycky, A., Cavanaugh, C. & Finn, J. (eds) 1995

*Freedom in the world 1994-1995. The annual survey of political rights and liberties*

Freedom House, New York, USA

Lane, R.E. (1994)

*The road not taken: friendship, consumerism and happiness*

Critical review, vol 8, pp 521-554

Maryanski, A. & Turner, J.H.

*The social cage. Human nature and the evolution of society*

Stanford University Press, 1992, Stanford, California, USA

Mastekaasa, A. & Moum, T. (1984)

*The perceived quality of life in Norway. Regional variations and contextual effects.*

Social Indicators Research, vol 14, pp 385-419

Naroll, R. (1983)

*The moral order. An introduction to the human situation*

Sage, Beverly Hills, USA

Phillips, D.L.

*Looking backward. A critical appraisal of communitarian thought*

Princeton university Press, 1993, Princeton, NJ, USA

Saris, W.E., Scherpenzeel, A.C., Veenhoven, R. & Bunting, B. (eds) (1996)

*A comparative study of satisfaction with life in Europe.*

Eötvös University Press, Budapest, Hungary

Schwartz, S.H. (1994)

*Beyond individualism-collectivism. New dimensions of values*

in: Kim, U., Triandis, H.C. & Yoon, G. (eds) 'Individualism and collectivism. Theory, method and application' Sage, USA

Seligman, M (1988)

*'Me' decades generate depression*

APA Monitor, vol 19 pp 18 (interview by James Bule)

Straver, C.J., VanderHeiden, A.M. & VanderVliet, R.W.F. (1994)

*De huwelijkse logica (Marital logic)*

DSWO Press, Leiden, Netherlands

Triandis, H.C. (1990)

*Cross-cultural studies of individualism and collectivism.*

in: Berman, J.J. (ed) Cross-cultural perspectives. Nebraska symposium on motivation 1989.

Nebraska University Press, London, UK.

UNDP (1995)

*Human Development Report 1995*

United Nations development Program, Oxford University Press

Veenhoven, R. (1984)

*Conditions of happiness*

Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht/Boston

Veenhoven, R. ed. (1989i)

*How harmful is happiness? Consequences of enjoying life or not*

Universitaire Pres Rotterdam, The Hague, Netherlands

Veenhoven, R. (1989f)

*Is happiness relative?*

Social Indicators Research, vol 24, pp 1-34

Veenhoven, R. (1993b)

*Happiness in nations. Subjective appreciation of life in 56 nations 1964-1992*

Risbo, Series Studies in Socio-cultural transformations nr 2

Erasmus University Rotterdam

(update available on Internet <http://www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness>)

Veenhoven, R. (1994c)

*How satisfying is rural life?*

in: Cecora, J. (ed) Changing values and attitudes in family households, with rural peer groups, social networks and action spaces. Society for agricultural policy and rural sociology (FAA), Bonn, Germany, pp 41-52

Veenhoven, R. (1996a)

*Developments in satisfaction research*

Social Indicators Research, vol 37 pp 1-46

Veenhoven, R. (1996b)

*Happy Life-expectancy: a comprehensive measure of quality-of-life in nations.*

Social Indicators Research, vol 39. pp 1-57

Veenhoven, R. (1996c)

*World Database of Happiness, 1996 update*

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Netherlands

Internet site: <http://www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness>

Waldron, I., Nowtarski, M., Freimer, M., Henry, J.P., Post, N.J. & Witten, C. (1982)

*Cross-cultural variation in blood pressure: A quantitative analysis of the relationships of blood pressure to cultural characteristics, salt consumption and body weight.*

Social Science and Medicine, vol 19, pp 419-430

Waterman, A.S. (1984)

*The psychology of individualism*

Preager, New York, USA

World Values Study 2

*Cumulative file ICPSR file 6160,*

International Consortium for Political Science Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA



## NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were published in DeJong and Zijderveld (1997: 149-171) and presented at the International Congress of Sociology in Montreal 1998
2. The concept of individualism is applied to societies as well as to individuals. This paper is concerned with individualization of society. For an application of the concept to individual personality see Triandis (1990: 114). Triandis defines individualism (in contrast to collectivism) as more emotional detachment from others, less attention to views of others, less concern for family and more competition.
3. Maryanski & Turner claim that the human preference for 'weak ties' fitted well with the structure of hunter-gatherer society in which the species developed. Hunter-gatherer societies allow considerable freedom. In their view this aspect of human nature did not fit well with the collectivist pressures of later horticultural and agrarian societies, that is with 'Gemeinschaft'. Industrial (individualized) Gesellschaft would fit human better with innate human preference.
4. Next to these sociological studies on the relation between quality-of-life individualization of society, there are psychological studies on the relationship between quality-of-life and personal individualization. Most of these studies took place in individualized societies. Much of this research is reviewed by Waterman (1984), who concludes that psychological autonomy goes hand in hand with good mental health and good social functioning. As this paper is concerned with individualization of society in the first place, I will not discuss that research tradition.
5. Bloodpressure is lowest in hunter-gatherer and horti-cultural societies and highest in agrarian societies. In industrial societies bloodpressure is in-between, though closer to the high level in agrarian society. The pattern of difference remains when salt consumption and body-weight are controlled.
6. The share of one-person household is commonly referred to as 'household individualization'. This is at best an aspect of the broader phenomenon at stake here.
7. The difference between 'negative-' and 'positive' freedom is discussed in more detail by Blokland (1997).
8. This factor involves: economic freedom, political freedom and personal freedom (as measured by acceptance of homo-sexuality, suicide and euthanasia).
9. Bay (1965) refers to these capability requirements as respectively 'potential freedom' (awareness of alternatives) and 'psychological freedom' (guts to choose).
10. Above I argued against the measurement of individualization by proxies such as economic development and urbanization. Here we are dealing with a specific aspect of individualism, awareness of life-style options. In this case I deem the use of this proxy acceptable, though not ideal.
11. Possibly this is a result of the last decades political and economic liberalizations in Latin-America. However, the more recent liberalizations in Eastern-Europe has not (yet?) materialized in greater subjective freedom. Still another possibility is that the high degree of individualization in Western-Europe and Anglo-America makes people more sensitive to limitations to their freedom. This latter effect is predicted by Bay (1965) in his discussion of the relationship between his concepts of 'social freedom' and 'potential freedom'.
12. Responses to single survey questions on happiness are *valid* in that they do not measure something other than subjective appreciation of one's life-as-a-whole. The responses are not very *reliable* because respondents are typically imprecise in communicating the degree to which they appreciate life. For instance, many hesitate between the 'very' and 'fairly' happy response category, and alternate between these responses. Low reliability is a problem in individual level analyses, it attenuates correlations. It is no problem in the aggregate level analyses reported here. Random errors balance out in the average.

13. This perspective is commonly applied in explanations of individual differences in quality-of-life within nations. See French et al (1974) for a formal statement of the approach. It has also been applied for explaining differences across subcultures, for instance by Mastekaasa & Moum (1984) who analysed regional variation in happiness in Norway.
14. These capabilities are the most valuable assets of our time. One could refer to them as 'psychological capital'. Appropriate capabilities affect happiness far more than the positional matters referred to as 'social capital'. Numerous studies have shown that status, taste and education are almost unrelated to happiness in modern society.