

The Social-Institutional Bases of Happiness: An International Comparison

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Abstract

Happiness, although often studied as an individual-level phenomenon, is socially situated. In this cross-national investigation of happiness, we use data from the 2002 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to examine the economic, social and institutional factors associated with happiness in 29 countries. Based on our multilevel models of happiness, we find variation in happiness at both the individual- and the country-level, with women reporting greater happiness in more gender-egalitarian countries, cohabiters reporting greater happiness in countries with more relaxed moral guidelines, and with cohabiters, those with children, and lower-income respondents reporting greater happiness in countries with higher levels of public social spending. We point to this significant country-level variation in happiness in arguing for a theoretical model which contextualizes happiness in the appropriate social and institutional context.

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