

Genes play a key part in the recipe for a happy country

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Why are the Danes naturally more cheerful than the Brits, and why are we in turn more upbeat than the French? Research presented as part of this year's ESRC Festival of Social Sciences shows us that the recipe behind a happy nation includes a list of ingredients – including increased equality, a fair and just welfare state, and trustworthy institutions and politicians – but specific genetic factors can have a significant effect.

Professor Andrew Oswald, an economist at Warwick University, has spent a lifetime investigating what makes people happy. His research has shown us that happy people are disproportionately the young and old (not middle-aged), rich, educated, married, in work, healthy exercise-takers, and slim - with diets high in fruit and vegetables.

As well as these lifestyle factors, the quality of government and institutions within a country, as well as how equal the people are within them, has been shown to have an effect.

Recently Professor Oswald has shown that genetics may also explain the happiness of Scandinavian countries. He compared 131 nations and found that the closer a nation was genetically to the Danes, the happier its people were. This was even when taking into account other influences including Gross Domestic Product (GDP), culture, religion and the strength of the [welfare state](#) and geography.

He looked closer at a specific gene known to regulate levels of the brain neurotransmitter serotonin – a lack of which is found in people with

depression. Previous research has suggested that whether you inherit the long or the short form of this gene can affect how likely you are to become depressed. Those that inherit the short form of the gene report lower life satisfaction and display more neuroticism.

"Intriguingly, among the 30 nations we studied, Denmark and the Netherlands appeared to have the lowest percentage of people with this short version of the serotonin gene", says Professor Oswald.

More evidence for a genetic link comes from the fact that, when Professor Oswald looked at the happiness of Americans whose ancestors had emigrated from other countries, he could find a direct correlation between the individual's reported happiness, and the levels of happiness in the country their ancestors had come from.

"Our study revealed an unexplained correlation between the happiness today of some nations and the observed happiness of Americans whose ancestors came from these nations," says Professor Oswald.

Other findings show that happy nations are rich, educated, democratic, trusting and have low-unemployment. Top of the class comes Denmark, the happiest nation on Earth with an average [life satisfaction](#) score of 7.69 out of 10. The Netherlands and Ireland also do well, with Great Britain and the US floundering further down, and France and Italy doing relatively poorly.

The reasons behind this are not fully understood. It is clear that GDP and a country's wealth have a role, however, research has shown that as our country has become richer, [happiness](#) levels have remained flat. In other words, although the majority of people within western societies have become richer over time, we haven't become any happier.

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