

Why the world's happiest country (and yours) should think more about people's well-being

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The length of the border between Finland and Russia is 1,340 kilometers. Besides separating the European Union country from its neighbor, the border has also marked a grim reality: the largest happiness

gap in Europe, with the happiest country alongside one of the unhappiest.

Finland has received a lot of attention for taking the top spot in the World Happiness Report in recent years, but what does [happiness](#) really mean there and around the globe?

For many years, researchers have measured well-being based on factors related to the economy, environment and unemployment statistics, but according to Frank Martela, university lecturer at Aalto University, we also need to look at factors that show how a country becomes—and remains—happy.

"Other countries outside of the Nordics, like Canada, New Zealand and Netherlands have started examining well-being more closely to better understand what factors explain why some citizens are happy and some not. well-being is very multi-layered. First, of course, you need to have your basic needs met. We might take food, shelter, and clean drinking water as self-evident, but if you suddenly lose them—like many civilians in Ukraine right now—life becomes a struggle. It's much easier to think about higher needs, such as self-expression, when you can take your survival relatively for granted," Martela explains.

How happiness works

Happiness seems to be a notion we universally value as humans—a consequence of human action that needs no further explanation. When you ask someone why they did something and their answer is "it made me happy," that's typically enough of a reason.

"The international comparisons of national happiness typically focus on life satisfaction—they ask people, 'How satisfied are you with your life?'" Martela explains. "Finland seems to excel here because of the

Finnish welfare system's ability to help its citizens feel taken care of. Things like relatively generous unemployment benefits and nearly free healthcare help mitigate sources of unhappiness, ensuring that there are fewer people in Finland who are highly unsatisfied with their lives."

Finland's ranking as the world's happiest country in 2018–2021 is from the World Happiness Report, which is based on surveys conducted in 160 different countries to gauge people's satisfaction. It asks the same question in each country: Think about your life on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being the worst possible life and 10 being the best. How would you rate your life on this scale? Similar surveys are also conducted by other organizations, like the European Union, which examines life satisfaction in all of its member countries.

"Research shows that high national ranking on these surveys is not so much about culture," Martela notes. "It's more about how a country's institutions take care of their people—this leads to higher ratings of [life satisfaction](#)."

This explains the stark gap between Finland and neighboring Russia seen recently in the happiness report. "While well-functioning democracy and institutions, low corruption, and trust between people explain the high levels of happiness in Finland, it is exactly the absence of these factors that explain why Russians are so much less satisfied with their lives," says Martela.

You are what you measure

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, the Finnish Prime Minister's Office has been conducting a monthly survey to get fast and up-to-date information on the population's current attitudes and feelings. Recently, Martela collaborated with them to devise new questions examining current levels of well-being.

"Asking Finns to answer questions on a frequent, monthly basis is super important when measuring well-being. The pandemic is a good example of things happening fast—we had to catch up just as fast! We wouldn't get this data if we only measured markers once a year," Martela explains.

"It will be interesting to see what the survey reveals about how Finns have reacted to the war nearby. I am quite sure we will see increased stress and decreased optimism, but are there some demographic groups for whom the effects are especially strong? And who, as a result, would need more targeted help? Surveys like this can help to identify vulnerable groups within the population, so we can better support them."

How frequently you survey a population can help [policy-makers](#) quickly see what's working and what's driving discontent, placing hope in the future of policy to address people's needs, and ultimately, their well-being.

With the help of Martela and his colleagues, we're starting to see that asking questions about a population's well-being—and more specifically about how satisfied people are with their country's ability to take care of them—could be the ultimate ticket to tranquility.

"Instead of saying 'Finland is the happiest country in the world,' perhaps a better statement is 'Finland is the country where people are least unhappy.' When the institutions take care of citizens and ensure that their [basic needs](#) are met, they are more free to live the kind of life they want—allowing a sense of satisfaction and happiness to exist," says Martela.

More information: 2022 World Happiness Report: worldhappiness.report/

Provided by Aalto University

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