

The role of unobservable subjective factors in the experience of happiness

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The notion of happiness is highly subjective, and whether we consider ourselves to be happy might be determined by the conditions in which we find ourselves, but may well be controlled to some degree by past experiences, genetics, cognitive traits and various other factors.

Adalgiso Amendola, Roberto Dell'Anno, and Lavinia Parisi of the University of Salerno in Fisciano, Italy, have used a "residual-based" approach to distinguish between the direct and indirect effects of various

factors on [happiness](#), all mediated by social, economic, and family dynamics. Their findings suggest that such unobservable factors only account for about 25% of a person's happiness as extracted from data in the European Quality of Life Survey. Up to 75% seems to be due to genetic and/or [personality traits](#). Details are provided in the *International Journal of Happiness and Development*.

The team points out that most people can be described as having a baseline happiness level. Individuals return to this "default" level following strong positive or negative life events and it is this default that the research sought to examine in terms of the factors that affect it. Given that policymakers may not always consider the happiness of the people under their jurisdiction but have an impact nevertheless, this research provides a useful insight showing that decisions that change society and affect individuals may not be as influential on happiness as was perhaps originally thought.

Policymakers can only really affect socioeconomic, demographic, environmental, and relative deprivation determinants of unhappiness. And, as the research suggests such exogenous factors have a smaller impact on happiness than those factors that control one's baseline happiness level. Improving the [quality of life](#), healthcare, and reducing the poverty gap may not raise a person's baseline happiness but will improve quality of life nevertheless. External factors make a smaller contribution than the endogenous factors that generate that baseline so [policymakers](#) may have little scope for improving overall happiness. They may not be able to give the greatest gift, but they can improve quality of life and maybe that will add up above a person's baseline and bring more happiness to more people.

More information: Adalgiso Amendola et al, Why some people are not as happy as they could be: the role of unobservable subjective factors, *International Journal of Happiness and Development* (2022).

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