

# Study debunks myth that some nations are happier than others

7 March 2018, by Will Wright



Credit: Australian National University

A new study from The Australian National University (ANU) has challenged the notion that some nations' citizens are happier than others, finding that inequalities within nations have a greater influence on people's happiness.

The study's author Dr. Richard Burns said the findings questioned the usefulness and validity of comparisons of happiness between nations.

"All things considered, happiness does not actually vary very much between nations," said Dr. Burns, from the ANU Research School of Population Health.

"Many of the reported happier nations, such as Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden and the Netherlands often report rates of suicide and psychiatric distress that are in the top 15-25 percent of the world's nations."

Dr. Burns said the findings suggested that people's happiness could be improved if governments addressed inequalities in their own countries, by improving the ratio between living wage and cost-of-living.

"The results showed that if government policy helped improve the capacity of people to live comfortably on their income, it could lead to an improvement in people's happiness," he said.

Using a multi-national study of 23 European countries with 11 different wellbeing indicators, Dr. Burns examined how much happiness differed between nations.

Wellbeing indicators included vitality, self-esteem, purpose, trust and belonging, and life satisfaction.

Dr. Burns also investigated whether differences in happiness were more strongly attributed to factors between nations, or whether it was the differences between people within countries that influenced their happiness.

Differences between nations analysed included [gross domestic product](#), rate of unemployment, and level of trust in the judiciary and political systems.

"Whether citizens in different nations are living with a sense of purpose, vitality and engagement, or of belonging to a community—strong indicators of people's happiness—is really unrelated to the [nation](#) in which they live," Dr. Burns said.

He said of the 11 different wellbeing indicators measured, only one differed substantially between nations: life satisfaction.

"About 22 percent of respondents' life satisfaction varied between nations, but this is not surprising," Dr. Burns said.

He said [life satisfaction](#) was often used as a measure of quality of life in economic, social and public health research, but it did not provide a full picture of people's [happiness](#).

The research is published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

**More information:** Richard A. Burns. The Utility of Between-Nation Subjective Wellbeing Comparisons Amongst Nations Within the European Social Survey, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2018). DOI: [10.1007/s10902-018-9964-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-9964-4)

Provided by Australian National University

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