

## Is happiness linked to quality-of-life factors like climate?

A new report finds a close match between individual happiness and objective quality-of-life measures such as climate, air quality, and schools. But others say happiness is more nearly tied to family, friends, and religion.



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Los Angeles —

"The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself," wrote Benjamin Franklin. Nearly half a century later Abraham Lincoln said, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."

Today, a report in the journal *Science* describes research carried out by the University of Warwick in Britain and Hamilton College in upstate New York that finds that internal happiness is more closely related to external conditions — such things as climate, air quality, and schools — than many have assumed.

"In a sample of one million Americans across 50 states, there is a close match between people's subjective life-satisfaction scores and objectively-estimated quality of life," the report concludes. Researchers found that states that are ranked highly in objective quality-of-life measures (Wyoming, South Dakota, and Arkansas) also have the highest average levels of self-reported satisfaction.

While some might wonder why a large, costly study is needed to show what sounds like common sense, key research experts say this is the first time that research has combined the two variables — objective and subjective — in ways that can aid public policy makers, real estate agents, community builders, and others in tangible ways.

"The new study ... is clear, simple, and potentially quite important," says Robert Epstein, visiting scholar at the University of California at San Diego and former editor in chief of *Psychology Today*. "They're saying, quite correctly, that hundreds — maybe thousands — of studies evaluate people's happiness simply by asking them how happy they are. Is that an accurate measure of happiness? Maybe people are just saying what researchers want to hear — or what they themselves want to be feeling."

The study is valuable, Dr. Epstein says, because it uses a massive amount of data obtained from more than 1 million people in all 50 states to show that yes, generally speaking, self-reports of happiness are probably accurate.

“That might sound obvious, but sometimes studies like this turn up surprising results. This time, common sense – and the accuracy of self-reports – was confirmed,” says Epstein.

## Study too esoteric and abstract?

Others say that the study is too esoteric and abstract to be useful, that there is a danger in thinking that happiness can be defined.

“This study doesn't pass my smell test,” says radio host Debbie Mandel, author of “Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7-Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life.”

If particular physiological readings are to be taken as measures of human happiness because they correlate with subjective well-being scores, she says, “then those readings do not simultaneously provide – unless it has been established by another method that such readings truly measure happiness – an independent validation of the meaningfulness of subjective well-being data; biological indicators are not themselves unambiguous measures of human happiness. Hence there exists a circularity that needs somehow to be broken.”

Still others say the researchers' premises and methodology are flawed.

“The study is trying to link people's subjective reports of happiness (or unhappiness) with objective conditions like weather, job market, school systems, traffic, air quality,” says author B.J. Gallagher, author of “Why Don't I Do the Things I Know Are Good for Me?” In other words, they want to try to find a connection between external circumstances and internal feelings. The danger in that, she says, is that correlation does not imply causation.

## Correlation may not imply causation

“That is, just because two things seem to be correlated ... i.e., they go up and down together ... does not mean that one caused the other. In this case, it does not mean that nice weather, a good job market, and clean air are what make people feel happy.”

Ms. Gallagher also notes that there is no mention of family, friends, or religion in the study, factors that hugely influence people's happiness.

“Millions of people live in miserable climates, with lousy job markets, low standards of living, poor schools, and many other unfavorable factors ... and they are still happy,” says Gallagher.

“Louisiana is a case in point,” she says. “This new study reports that the happiest people are those in Hawaii and in Louisiana. So is it the climate or the tight family structures and strong community ties? I would argue that it's the latter, not the former. Hawaii has a wonderful climate and Louisiana has a terrible climate, yet both states have the happiest people? It is not objective circumstance that make it so. I suspect it is their social fabric: Hawaii is heavily Asian with strong family ties and good community values and Louisiana's background is heavily influenced by French Catholics and Haitians, also with strong social ties.”

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