

What Constitutes Experiences of Happiness and the Good Life? – Building a Novel Model on the Everyday Experiences

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The quest for happiness, contentment, and the experience of a good life is at the heart of human nature. The point of departure of this article concerns the concepts of good life and happiness, and their relationship, both in philosophy and in social sciences. The text will then move to the findings of previous empirical research on these issues. The core of this article concerns empirical findings on the experiences of good life of Finns today, based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of recent data: the article builds a novel model based on the everyday experiences. The findings will then also be considered in relation to the previous happiness studies and motivation theories, and finally illustrated in relation to particular paradoxes of happiness and good life.

Introduction

The quest for happiness, contentment, and the experience of a good life is at the heart of human nature, being what people want for themselves, their children, and their fellow citizens. Happiness, as a concept, is – as Marar (2003) has noted – both deceptively simple and maddeningly elusive.

There are two issues that make the study of happiness and good life particularly interesting. First, happiness is both a very philosophical and very empirical matter – as well as very research-oriented and very everyday-life-related. Books about happiness pour off the presses, and happiness is poked and prodded from every disciplinary direction. Like diet books, the appetite for self-help books on happiness (e.g. a recent ones by Ryan 2005; Lyubomirsky 2007; Gilbert 2007) seems to be limitless. The World Database of Happiness includes at the moment almost 4500 pieces of research. There may be various reasons for this. One central viewpoint

Heli Tissari, Anne Birgitta Pessi & Mikko Salmela (eds.) 2008
Happiness: Cognition, Experience, Language

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 3.
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 59–78.

is that decades of careful scholarly work, especially in economics and psychology, have recently been brought to much wider attention and a wider audience, which has given philosophers an opportunity, and a reason, to revisit the long-standing debates about Aristotelian *eudaemonia*, utilitarianism, free will, and so forth. Furthermore, books about happiness also tap into the growing sense of unease and discontentment in today's world, and our wish to increase self-knowledge. (Reeves 2006) According to many (e.g., Marar 2003; Layard 2005), the elements that improve happiness: family relations, communities, and moral values have been undermined. We may indeed be in need of happiness and good life and conceptualizations of them.

Second, the search for happiness and research on it is both extremely timely and timeless. Historically, the philosophical and theological understanding of happiness was that it derived from good deeds and the improvement of one's moral character. Notions of happiness underwent a radical shift in the late 18th century with the dawn of a more subjective, psychologically-based concept of human action and human life. We moved from the Socratic question of "How ought I to live" to the modern, and late-modern, question of "What do I really want?" From morality and the idea of being good we have moved toward individual needs and feeling good. (Marar 2003) In today's individually-centered culture this is ever more true.

The point of departure of this article is the concepts of good life and happiness, and their relationship. The text will then move to the findings of previous empirical research on these issues. The core of this article, then, concerns novel empirical findings on the experiences of good life of Finns today. In later part of this text these findings will be considered in relation to the previous happiness studies and motivation theories, and finally illustrated in relation to particular paradoxes of happiness and good life.

How Should Happiness and Good Life Be Approached?

As Diener & Suh have noted (1997) there are various perspectives on happiness. First, we may look at principles arising from outside the individual. Philosophical and religious perspectives offer understandings of happiness that are not dependent on any particular individual as such. Second, happiness may be viewed rather as fulfilling personal needs, hopes, and wishes, in which case experiences of happiness may even be measured. Third, happiness also concerns personal views; and one's personal conception of happiness. This has been the perspective in the majority of psychological and social scientific inquiries on happiness. Examples of empirical research are vast; as the focus of this article is not only on happiness but also, and particularly, on the experiences of good life, the previous empirical research will not be reviewed here. However, the section 'Are we happy', below, reviews the core

findings of recent international empirical happiness research. Additionally, it must also be noted that very clear majority of previous empirical research has focused particularly on happiness, not experiences of good life – the focus of this article.

More importantly, thus, in order to ponder good life and happiness it is valuable to take one step back: a step towards the classics of philosophy. Many philosophers have considered happiness to be the only thing that contributes to well-being – some have even used happiness to *mean the same* as well-being. Some have thought that the presence of positive feelings makes life go well, while others think that it is having one's desires fulfilled. Overall happiness has to do with both one's situation (e.g., being fortunate) and with one's state of mind (gladness, etc.) (Griffin 1998; Brandt 1967).

What was happiness for the forefathers of philosophy? For Aristotle, a central term in ethics was *eudaimonia* – which is most often translated in English as happiness (for a critique of this view, see e.g., Griffin 1998). More literally it means “good divine power”, “good fortune”, “good spirit”. Aristotle as well as Plato concluded that even if ordinary people find happiness in money, power, and friends, true happiness comes with contemplation and virtues (such as, honesty, justice, and truthfulness). This for them was an objective fact. For Aristotle, contemplation is the highest fulfilment of our nature as rational beings. According to one interpretation, Aristotle actually identifies contemplation with happiness (Aristotle 1985; see also White 2006; Griffin 1998).

Interestingly, many of Aristotles views on *eudaimonia* have recently been revived in the neo-Aristotelian accounts (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum). Various authors have noted that the basis of present-day moral discussion is increasingly lacking; we are in need of a more holistic notion of the good life, and what a human being is (e.g., Taylor 1991; MacIntyre 1981). Aristotelian views have also been applied to discussions on the development of Finnish society (Sihvola 1998) and its welfare model (Järveläinen & Mäkinen 2007). Furthermore, Aristotle and Plato agreed that the contemplative, philosophical life was better than virtuous political activity, and political activity was better than a hedonistic or money-making life (see also e.g., White 2006). As Korsgaard (1998, 134) has noted, some philosophers argue that this makes no sense: how can a certain way of life be better for you if there is no way in which you could enjoy, appreciate, or be interested in such a life and still be yourself?

The good life, then, for Aristotle and Plato is one in which one's existence is fulfilled completely. A good society is one in which the good life can be fulfilled in the best possible way. According to Aristotle, there are also objective measures of the 'good life', such as ethics, various abilities (to enjoy and to experience pain, for instance), a sense of communality, a relation to nature, and a sense of humour (Korsgaard 1998,

134; Pitkänen 1995; Knuutila 1995). The more recent writers have also linked the Aristotelian model to the development of the good life today; Nussbaum (1990) has noted that the good life consists of the fulfilment of basic human experiences such as experiencing pain and pleasure, cognitive abilities, planning one's life, communal relationships, humor, and understanding one's mortality.

One may easily associate the concept of the good life with morality and virtues in present-day discourses as well. However, 'the good' is the most general term of positive evaluation in philosophy, and is used to express approval in a wide range of contexts. Together with Aristotle and Plato, many ancient and medieval philosophers believed in the ultimate identity of the real and the good. Modern philosophers rejected this identification, taking a wide range of positions: there have been realists (good is part of reality), moral sense theorists (when we call something good we are projecting human interests onto reality), and emotivists (who use the term only to signify subjective approval) (Korsgaard 1998, 130, 133, see also Cottingham 1998).

The role of subjectivity is essential here. For instance, the moral philosopher R. M. Hare (1952) maintains that 'good' is a value term that is both descriptive and prescriptive (that is, promoting a moral direction), while 'the good' is primarily an evaluative term. However, the ethical theorist Mackie (1977) has noted that 'the good' as such does not exist. It always remains a subjective matter. Good is always related to one's interests.

Concerning the concept of 'good', philosophers have also distinguished between first, good things as ends (valued for their own sake) versus means (valued for the sake of the ends they promote), and second, intrinsic goods (values in themselves) versus extrinsic goods (which derive their value from their relation to something else) and, third, subjective goods (which are good for someone in particular) versus objective goods (which are good from everyone's point of view) (Korsgaard 1998, 130–131).

In social sciences, 'the good life' is usually what is considered good by the individual and/or society. Compared to the philosophical approaches, the sociology of the good life is thus particularly interested in subjective notions (i.e., close to the perspective of the emotivists) concerning both intrinsic and extrinsic goods and both subjective and objective goods.

The approach of this article resembles these last notions – social sciences and emotivists in philosophy. In other words, 'the good life' is not an ethical statement, nor a value statement of any kind, and the primary interest is in individual personal viewpoints on what 'the good life' is for them. The perspective may be more

morally oriented, happiness oriented, and so on, from one individual to another – all depending on how individuals themselves understand the concepts.

But what really is the relation between the good life and happiness? In studying the experiences of the good life – as in this article – are we conducting happiness research? In philosophy, ‘happy’ seems to imply a deeper level of experience than terms such as ‘comfortable’ and ‘gratified’ (Brandt 1967, 413). More empirically oriented authors (e.g., Ojanen 2006, 23; also Ojanen 2001) have concluded that elements of the good life might include truth, unity, love, autonomy, freedom, productivity, justice, responsibility, pleasure, fulfilling one’s needs, knowledge, variation, challenges, dignity, self-approval, and finding the meaning and purpose of life.

Psychologist Markku Ojanen, who also writes in this publication, has noted that the good life may be seen as a way towards happiness (Ojanen 2006, 109). This may well be the case in the vocabulary of everyday life; people may understand the subjective experience of the good life as somewhat milder than ‘being happy’. Personal vocabularies, however, vary from one individual to another. Thus, the experience-oriented viewpoint of this article should be further emphasized since investigating peoples views on ‘the good life’ surely illuminates their notions concerning happiness to some extent. This still eludes definition. Moreover, previous empirical research has largely concentrated on the experiences of happiness – the results of which will be discussed next – and very little research exists on the experiences of the good life.

Are We Happy?

Happiness is one of the mysteries at the interface between theory and praxis. Several great European philosophers of the human condition, such as Freud, Sartre, and Schopenhauer, agree with Western religion – or more specifically, various religious writers – that life is a somewhat grim journey towards death. Still, as noted by Nettle (2005), opinion surveys consistently show however that people everywhere consider themselves fairly happy.

Are we really happy then, according to the latest empirical inquiries – and if so how happy? Indeed, most individuals *are* happy; people experienced happiness (i.e., they scored over 5 on a scale of 1–10) in 37 countries out of the 43 countries that Diener and Diener (1996) surveyed. In a similar study by Hirvonen and Mangelöja (2006) people in 42 out of 50 countries rated their happiness over 5, the overall average being 6.3 (again on a 1–10 scale). Globally the happiest countries are the Nordic countries, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, and Canada (see, e.g., Ott 2005; Veenhoven 2005). Most happy countries are largely explained, obviously, by equal

distribution of financial resources (more than by the level of financial resources *per se*, see e.g. Lane 2001) and trust.

In Finland, recent figures indicated that 90% consider themselves happy (i.e., consider themselves “very” or “rather” happy, Hirvonen & Mangelaja 2006). Another recent study concluded that 8 out of 10 Finns are happy (Torvi & Kiljunen 2005; similar figures by, e.g., Ojanen 2006, 70–). The level of happiness has increased slightly – not very much and certainly not as much as the standard of living – during recent decades; “I am very happy” 19% of Finns noted in 1972, and in 2000 the corresponding figure was 25% (Hirvonen & Mangelaja 2006, 43).

All these figures can be looked at in two ways; i.e., the glass may be half empty or half full. For instance, if 8 out of 10 Finns are happy we still have over a million individuals who do not consider themselves happy, despite the very high Finnish and international figures overall.

Can we be this happy? There are, indeed, various methodological challenges that must be noted. People tend to overestimate their personal happiness and underestimate that of others, one reason for the latter being that the media brings unhappiness to our consciousness more than the brighter side. Happiness is also a very socially desirable answer in empirical research, and our present-day individualism-oriented culture may encourage people to provide such answers.

What then makes us happy? No single factor predominates. Most international research (e.g. Layard 2005) indicates that the most crucial elements are health, family and human relations, as well as spirituality. Frey & Stutzer (2002) have concluded that happiness is grounded on three factors: first, contextual (health, family, relations, job), personality (high self-esteem, self control, optimism, extroversion), and institutional (religion, opportunity to exert influence, freedom). Economic factors are also of some importance; however, their relation to happiness is a complicated matter (and thus the theme will be further pondered at the end of this article, in “Paradoxes of happiness and the good life”). Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and education do not explain differences in happiness. Recent research in Finland also indicates that it is other values than money that make us happy. These five elements, in order of importance, are: family, good health, good friendships and human relations, the experience of love, and a secure income; wealth is only twelfth on this list.

There is again a methodological challenge here; most of us act differently in everyday life. That is, we put a lot of time into matters other than family and love. Thus, people either really realize what makes them happy (and fill in questionnaires accordingly), or do not (and think that it is such things as money) but do not wish to admit this in surveys.

Empirical Inquiry

The results reported in this article are based on a postal survey of Finns in spring 2006 (response rate was slightly over 30%). The data includes 1051 respondents who are broadly representative of Finnish society; various age groups are well balanced yet women (65%) dominate men (35%) in the data. The questionnaire included questions on happiness similar to previous studies, whose basic findings were presented above. It included more items on religiosity and altruism, however, as well as a few open-ended questions. The empirical section of this article utilizes both the quantitative and qualitative data based on this survey.

One of the most fascinating parts of the data is the open-ended answers, 835 in all, to the question “In terms of your experiences and wishes, what is the good life like?” It is these answers, these accounts on individuals’ everyday life experiences that form the cornerstone of this study. One cautious notion must be made: the questionnaire focused much more on ‘happiness’ and ‘contentment’ than ‘experiences of good life’. Thus, this particular open-ended question is to some extent disproportional in relation to the other questions of the questionnaire. On the other hand, however, such setting may also underscore the particular theme in question (‘good life’ versus ‘happiness’), and thus bring further validity to the findings of this study, the findings of the experiences of good life.

The replies to this open question – “In terms of your experiences and wishes, what is the good life like?” – were subjected to thematic data-determined content analysis by the author of this article. In the first phase of the analysis, all the answers were read through carefully. The 835 open-ended answers produced altogether 2964 elements – not all different – of the good life. The second face of the analysis included thematic content analysis of these 2964 elements of the good life. The themes were determined by the data itself; i.e., they rose from the data. Thematic content analysis identified twenty-three core themes of the good life.¹ In the third phase, the centrality (both numerically and by emphasis) of each core theme (23 themes) in the overall data was analysed. This yielded a novel model, ‘an arrow towards the good life’, illustrating the phenomenon of good life experiences. This model will be discussed in the next section. The following sections include quotations from the data with codes – such as “M, 26”. These codes refer to the gender (M: men, W: women) and age of the respondents.

1 The representation, below, of the model ‘an arrow towards the good life’, including seven steps, will take the reader through these 23 core themes but they are, as listed according to their steps in the arrow-model: 1) relationships: family, people who are close, love, helping others, communality, communal activities, and a happy childhood (all in all 7 core themes), 2) balance: peace of mind, not too much stress, getting help if in need (3 core themes), 3) health (1 core theme), 4) secure income: high income, respect, balanced income (3 core themes), 5) fulfilling oneself: meaningfulness, emotional experiences, freedom, learning (4 core themes), 6) values & spirituality: peace and safety, peace of soul, religion (3 core themes), 7) work & leisure: meaningful work, hobbies (2 core themes).

Elements of Happiness – and Differences in It

Looking at the above noted new data as a whole (N1051), statistical analysis shows that people are relatively content with their lives, the question “How content are you with your life as a whole?” on a scale of 1–5 (1=very content, 5= very discontented) yielding 1.99. The question “How happy are you” yielded 2.03 on the same scale. Thus, while Finns seem to see little difference between “being content in life as a whole” and “being happy”, they do consider themselves slightly more content than happy. No statistically significant age differences can be detected with these two questions. However, the data shows that women are slightly both more content and happy than men.

But what makes Finns happy today? The answers to the question “How important are the following elements in your happiness?” (on a 1–5 scale, 1= very important, 5=not at all important) reveals a clear picture of the most and least important elements in the happiness of Finns. The five most and least central elements include:

MOST	LEAST
1. Family	1. Communal activities
2. Health	2. Religiosity
3. Love	3. Communality, sense of togetherness
4. Friends	4. Helping others
5. Secure income	5. Respect from others & learning new things
6. Getting help if in need & hobbies, freetime	

The lists of the most and least important elements are clear, and corroborate previous Finnish and international studies: human relations and health are the core of happiness. Additionally, helping others and getting help – altruism – now becomes apparent in happiness; however “getting help if in need” is considered more important than “helping others”, as the above lists indicate. It will be important to include these elements in our questionnaires in the future.

A clear majority of all these elements play a role in Finns happiness (i.e., the average is over 2.5, on the scale of 1–5). On the other hand, communality – or a sense of togetherness – seems to be relatively irrelevant to Finns happiness (average = 2.5). Finns also estimate that religion and communal activities are even less important elements of their happiness.

While the five most important elements of happiness are the same for both men and women, gender differences do play a part in the role of each element. Getting help when in need, religion, and the respect of others are more important

to women's happiness than men's when comparing the role of each element within the sex. By contrast, men find the role of learning new things, communal activities (e.g., volunteering) and hobbies more important to their happiness than women, again, comparing the role of each element within the sex. All in all, however, it is interesting to note that women rate the role of every single item more important for their happiness than men do. This may be related to the fact that women consider themselves slightly happier and more content than men. However, this does not explain everything. It may well be that women have been better socialized to vocabularies and can thus analyse their happiness more confidently.

Previous Finnish research on happiness has not revealed much difference between age groups. This data, however, did reveal some statistically significant differences. Friends, love, and hobbies are more important for happiness for young people than for the older age groups. The younger middle-aged value love, and older middle-aged learning and helping others more than other age groups. Overall, the age differences look as follows:

The most important elements in happiness of different age groups:

- The young (18–31)
 - Friends, love, hobbies
- Younger middle-age (32–45)
 - Love
- Older middle-age (46–59)
 - Learning (and helping others)
- The elderly (60–73)
 - Income, getting help when in need and helping others, communality and communal activities, religion

Various other background variables (e.g., professional position) are not significant in peoples evaluation of the various elements of their happiness. However, there are some statistically significant differences in relation to income, those with middle incomes considering the role of love, income, religion and communal action more important to their happiness. Those who earn the most rate the role of the family higher than others. This may reflect either socialization (e.g., through education) in family values or – and surely also – the wish for something an individual perhaps hopes to have more of (such as a peaceful time with the family in contrast to a busy yet highly-paid working life). This illustrates the fact that elements of happiness are always also mirrors of our experiences of 'lost times, happier days, golden eras, and dreams not (yet) come true'. Many wonder: "If only I had..."

Arrow Towards the Good Life

As noted above, the thematic analysis of the open-ended questions yielded a new model: ‘an arrow towards the good life’. Before its presentation it must also be noted that this model is a phenomenon-level construction. In other words, it is not created from the experiences of any particular individual, nor does it describe such experiences. The model includes a hierarchy, as some themes were much more significant (i.e., more central, more typical) in the data than others, and the model indeed aims to capture such illustrations and relations within the phenomenon of good life experiences. This hierarchy is represented in the model as the seven steps of good life, along the arrow. In order to reflect back on particular individuals, or to be used as a tool for personal reflection, however, the model and its hierarchical structure should be seen more flexibly. The order of the seven steps is clearly different for different individuals and for different respondents as well; the model represents a process.

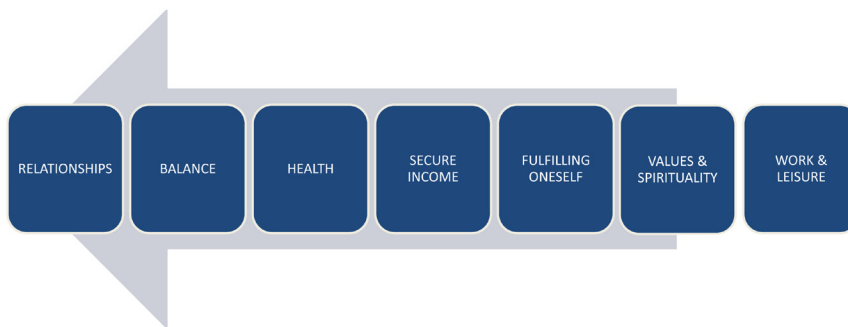


FIGURE 1. A Novel model: Arrow towards the good life – seven steps

As the figure indicates, individuals’ experiences of good life consist of seven steps along an arrow. The steps form a continuum: the left-most step – relationships – represents the most central, important elements of good life in the experiences of the respondents of this study. Let us next go through these seven steps along the ‘arrow towards the good life’.

The most central step of good life concerned *relationships: people who are close, communality, love* (826 elements in the data). The most important and central themes concerned the family, especially spouse and/or children, and the fact that everything is satisfactory with them (284). Friends and other social relationships (i.e., people who are close) were also often noted (330), and many included also family members in such a notion.² Many interviewees noted also

² This exemplifies the analysis: even if the elements concerning friends were numerically more typical than those concerning family (330 versus 284) not only the numbers were used in the analysis but, as noted above, the centrality (both numerically and by emphasis) of each core theme (23 themes) in the overall data was analysed. The notions concerning family members were often written with much of emphasis, strong vocabularies, and often in the beginning of answers.

more abstractly love, receiving and getting love (120), and such an answer may cover all relationships for many interviewees. Helping others (45), communality, a feeling of belonging (30), and communal activities (5), as well as a happy childhood (12), are also examples of definitions of the good life included in the open-ended answers. The following quotations illuminate these themes:

- *Nice chick, decent income* (M, 26)
- *To be able to be healthy, loved and as good as possible to others* (W, 34)
- *To love and be loved. To accept and be accepted. To care and to be cared for* (W, 50)
- *Everybody should have a safety net that consists of close people so that no one has to carry their burdens alone* (W, 24)

The second step of the good life is about *balance, contentment, and safety* (451). Here a very significant theme was what could be called peace of mind (383): equilibrium, safety, being at peace with oneself, contentment, peace, emotional well-being, moderation, inner well-being, a positive attitude, harmony, happiness, joy and sorrow, serenity, feeling happy, physical/psychic/mental well-being. Some also wrote about balance and safety in the sense of not having too much stress, and being unhurried (45). Getting help when in need (23) was also noted by some in relation to a sense of balance and peace. The following quotations exemplify this step of balance:

- *Peace with oneself. You need to be content with what you have and stop waiting for your dreams to come true* (W, 52)
- *The good life is a condition in which all the important aspects of life are in balance* (W, 24)
- *Being at peace with oneself, and others too!* (W, 55)
- *Inner balance with respect to God, neighbours and oneself!* (M, 55)
- *When you go to bed at night, you fall asleep right away because you don't need to worry about world peace and such things* (M, 49)
- *A good life is balancing duty and fun, work and leisure* (W, 20)
- *Inner balance with respect to God, neighbours and oneself!* (M, 26)

The third step of the good life concerned health (361), particularly good health. This theme concerned both the young and the elderly, and individuals in between. In other words, no specific age differences could be detected in the data. These notions can be illuminated by such quotations as:

- *That one could die a healthy man* (M, 68)
- *Not too many or too difficult problems, at least a few good friends, family and an interesting job as well, not overly big problems with money or health* (W, 33)

The fourth step was about a secure income (312). Here only a few noted and/or wished for a high income (13); a young woman, however, wrote:

- My goal for a good life is to get a lot of money. I believe money also brings love. And if it doesn't, it sure helps a lot! (W, 23)

The vast majority were more interested in a secure income, moderation – that is, having finances in balance (295). Also people's respect constituted an element of good life for some individuals (4). Again, quotations illuminate these core themes as follows:

- Healthy, sensible and gets the food on the table (M, 32)*
- Decent income, not constant money problems, not too much wealth, good health, a good place to live. A job with decent pay and job prospects (W, 52)*
- In a good life one learns from mistakes and little by little starts accepting oneself the way one is. That way you also get the respect of others. The worst thing must be the feeling of an unfulfilled life (W, 67)*

After health and finances, the following step was concerned somewhat more with the abstract elements of the good life; the fifth step of the good life is about fulfilling oneself (305). The most significant theme was clearly about meaningfulness, elements such as having meaningful things to do, a purpose in life, reaching goals, high spirits, living according to one's values, as well as having dreams and joy in life being mentioned (148). Many also mentioned emotional responses, experiences, versatility (i.e., art, travel, peace and the pleasures of nature) (59) as well as having freedom, independence (including inner independence, i.e., not comparing oneself to others), dreams, and throwing oneself into things (59). Learning, self-improvement, finding oneself, self-knowledge, and having challenges (39) were also noted. The following quotations illuminate these viewpoints:

- At times there are quieter periods and then things happen really fast at other times in a good life. First and foremost, the good life consists of opposites (M, 19)*
- Small moments of happiness, freedom of choice, activeness based on a positive attitude – willingness to make life good for oneself, lots of love (W, 29)*
- To improve oneself in the following qualities: friendliness, goodness, love, loyalty, justice, self-control and patience (M, 34)*
- You live your dreams freely choosing what you'll do (W, 31)*
- You wake up in the morning waiting to meet the miracles of a new day and go to bed at night thinking the day has been anything but dull (W, 47)*

The sixth step of the good life also concerns rather abstract notions: values, spirituality, and peace of soul (200). Here the two most central themes were, first, peace and safety in a rather literal sense (peaceful home/dwelling, peaceful neighbourhood, nature, one's own house, aesthetic pleasure, stability, safety) (78), and second, peace of soul in relation to one's 'wholesome basic values' (justice, honesty, respecting others, altruism, a good conscience, not harming others, living

right, appreciating others, sincerity) (78), as well as religion (44). Quotations are again illuminating:

- *A safe home where you can be yourself* (W, 37)
- *The good life is found in forgiveness* (W, 64)
- *A life in which you can do things appointed by God and be a blessing to others* (M, 32)
- *Justice is the basis for a good life. It should be available to everyone* (W, 60)

The theme of balancing work and leisure has already been noted above; balance in one's everyday life was a crucial element already in the second step of the good life. However, many respondents also explained this theme individually; the seventh step of the good life concerns having meaningful work and/or hobbies (239). Here meaningful work was particularly important (156) in a good life, but hobbies, free time, and rest (83) were noted by many:

- *To have work, a decent income and warm housing and lots of good friends and acquaintances* (M, 66)
- *You need to have hobbies to avoid mental breakdown!* (M, 66)
- *Being loved and respected and having meaningful work* (W, 50)

The relation between happiness and work and un/employment has proved challenging in previous research; although most international studies have identified a clear link, most Finnish research (Böckerman & Ilmakunnas 2005a; 2005b) has found no connection. The need for further research remains.

Experiences of the Good Life – and What It Tells Us about Ourselves

All in all, what can be concluded from these findings on the experience of the good life by Finns? First of all, however, a slightly critical notion concerning the analysis must be made. Peoples' actual state of affairs will always, to some extent, determine their evaluations of how life ought to be lived (i.e., view of dialectical materialism); hence, what the findings above might be telling us is not only what good life for these individuals looks like and how they have experienced it but also various descriptions of how people actually live their lives. At the end, however, it has been central in this analysis to take the individual answers as there are and not, for instance, try to see 'behind' them (e.g., "she is saying this but she might actually mean..."). In other words, the data-determined methodological principle of this study remains un-changed: peoples' individual accounts on their experiences must be respected and listed to.

Overall, moderation, everyday life, balance, and ordinariness were very much emphasized by all respondents in their experiences of the good life. People seek for balance, not for extreme experiences of happiness. One, for instance, noted *“Being in balance with oneself and one’s loved ones, acknowledging the limitations of life, but still striving forward”* (W, 32). Very little emphasis was put on extreme experiences. It seems that in the experiences of the good life no one would like to be extremely happy, even less so for a whole lifetime. People value the variety of life; having sorrows and shadows that counterbalance the good moments and elements of happiness. Furthermore, a good life is something that one also works for; effort, purpose, challenge, and striving were repeatedly noted. The good life is not based on luck. It is achievable by all of us. Religion was not a common theme in the data overall. However, those who did mention it emphasized it very strongly: *“A close relationship with God is the basis for everything”* (W, 32).

Is the good life an individual experience? There were numerous shared themes in the data, along with quite a strong emphasis on individuality and relativity. One respondent noted: *“Everyone’s experience of a good life is different. A feeling of having done your best to feel good and being at peace with your past, yourself and others”* (W, 36).

These findings show that people are social beings who need trust in their relationships and who suffer stress in the face of change and the unfamiliar. Furthermore, the inner life has as much to do with happiness as outer circumstances – in fact more. The experience of the good life has most to do with relationships and both inner and outer balance. It also has a lot to do with health and financial income. Fulfilling oneself, values and spirituality, as well as the balance of work and leisure also play a role.

In fact, the notion of a human being reflected in these findings resonates quite well with the needs and wishes illustrated by psychologists. To refer to a classic theory, we can see the elements of Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” (1943; see also the newer version in Maslow 1970). His well-known theory contends that once human beings meet ‘basic needs’, they seek to satisfy successively ‘higher needs’. Such a hierarchy of needs is often depicted as a pyramid consisting of five levels: the four lower levels are grouped together as *deficiency needs* associated with physiological needs, while the top level is termed *growth needs* associated with psychological needs. While the former must be met – higher needs in this hierarchy only become relevant once all the lower needs are mainly or entirely satisfied – the latter are those that continually shape behaviour.

As is well known in academia, in Maslow’s model deficiency needs, to start from the most basic, are: physiological (e.g., food, water, sex), safety (e.g., security of body, of employment, of morality), love/belonging (e.g., friendship, family),

and esteem needs (e.g., confidence, achievement, the respect of others). The growth needs at the top of the pyramid concern self-actualization (e.g., morality, spontaneity, and creativity).

The central point of Maslow's theory is that the individual does not feel anything, anything special or specific, if the deficiency needs are met, but – and particularly – feels anxious if they are not met. How might this be illustrated in the findings of this article? In the experiences of the good life reported above an illustration of this is that the most primal needs are the most crucial ones: they are the very elements that matter the most in relation to being content, and experiencing the goodness of life. In fact, people seem to be more aware of the role of love relationships, groups of belonging, and safety (both in more concrete and more abstract senses) in their contentment and happiness than Maslow's view would perhaps lead us to believe. In pondering their experiences of the good life people seem – indeed – to 'feel something' about these matters.

By contrast, growth needs, in Maslow's view, do not go away when fulfilled. Rather, they motivate individuals further. It is exactly these elements that also seem to play a very important role in the experiences of the good life: elements related to balance, fulfilling oneself, and values. For Maslow, the peak of the pyramid separates humans from animals. However, he also considered that very few individuals really reach the peak (according to some sources only two in a hundred); and this is a notion that is very often forgotten in references to Maslow's model. Comparing the results above with the numerous studies by Maslow, the methodology and data could not really be more remote from each other, but it must still be noted that looking at Finnish experiences of the good life, the peak of self-actualization in all its forms – morality, spontaneity, creativity, etc. – seems to be well represented.

Steps of the Good Life – or Happiness?

The results overall, like happiness studies, show that human beings are social creatures. However, experiences of the good life seem to incline more towards contentment than peaks of happiness; people primarily choose balance and security. The good life then takes us close to the concept of contentment, and being content.

But how do the findings really compare with the previous findings on happiness? Do experiences of the good life differ from experiences of happiness? First of all, family and relationships are at the centre of both. However, moderation and ordinariness are much more important in the experiences of the good life than in happiness.

Furthermore, a strong new theme – in contrast to happiness studies – rose from the data, namely finding equilibrium and balance. One respondent, to take an

example, defined the good life as “*REALLY ordinary life that includes honesty, love and caring; being in balance with oneself. With all the elements in one’s life*” (M, 31). Such a search for balance was also strongly related to the above-noted search for ordinariness; “*The good life is love, caring and sincerity in a quite ordinary life*” (W, 37). Additionally, this notion of balance offered a larger framework for many of the formulations concerning the good life. For example, health is a theme that is central to both these findings on the good life and to previous studies on happiness; however, in this data it was precisely this theme that was more central than health, for instance. Health was often emphasized as a part of this wish for the harmonious contentment of balance.

Furthermore, a secure basic income, peace and values, as well as fulfilling oneself are three notions that seem more important to the good life than happiness. Interestingly, grief and sorrow are also included as central elements – ones which are not emphasized in happiness studies. Interviewees noted, for example, that “*The good life is a mixture of joys and sorrows – and in proper, balanced proportion*” (W, 59); “*A life lived with disappointments but also sparks of joy every now and then*” (W, 58).

Additionally, one very immediate but interesting theme that the previous studies have not noted and which was often noted in this data is one’s own home and immediate environment as elements of a good life. This may well be in relation to the fundamentals of the good life: sharing private surroundings with a loved one, in peace and harmony, sharing sorrows and happy moments of life.

Paradoxes of Happiness and the Good Life

Previous literature, particularly on empirical research, suggests certain paradoxes of happiness. How might these relate to the findings concerning the good life? Let us conclude this article by pondering three particular paradoxes of happiness.

First of all, we are richer than ever before but we are not happier. Empirical research has indicated that satisfying basic wants does increase happiness. After that, however, the relationship between happiness and money breaks down. Thus, happiness in the global perspective has remained at roughly its 1975 level. Even though we are four times richer than we were in the 1950s, we are not much happier – and/or we may even be less happy (Hirvonen & Mangelaja 2006, 67–72; Layard 2005). In other words, once basic human needs have been met, increases in income do not correlate with increases in happiness. Easterbrook (2004) has called this the “development paradox” or the “progress paradox”.

Various factors may explain this paradox. First, our wants increase according to our means (as our incomes rise, so do our expectations). Second, we compare ourselves with others all the time; the extent to which we value what we have depends very much on what those around us have (e.g., Hirvonen & Mangelaja 2006, 27–28). In other words, our happiness is affected more by relative income than by absolute income level. Third, we have a hypostasis mechanism which means that changes in our lives such as an increase in income only make us happier for a little while. Fourth, we also have a mechanism of positive thinking and high future expectations that may be related to this in that we believe we will be happier in the future than today. This also affects our happiness expectations and thus may promote *lack* of happiness and contentment in the present situation.

One central point must be made; there is, of course, the possibility that the “development paradox” may simply be explained at least in part by the fact that economic well-being is not crucial to individual happiness, and perhaps even less so for people’s experiences of the good life. It is suggestive that financial security plays a role, yet not a very central one in the ‘arrow towards the good life’.

Here we must naturally also return to the methodological challenge noted earlier in this article that either people really realize what makes them happy (and fill in both questionnaires and open-ended questions as in this study accordingly), or do not realize it (and think that happiness consists of such things as money) but do not wish to admit this in surveys. This secret can only be resolved by each of us in our everyday experiences, and even that is not necessarily easy. It may, for example, involve a clash between dreams and reality.

Marar (2003) has noted two further paradoxes of happiness. First, the need to feel free (‘what do I really want?’) as against the need to feel justified (‘how ought I to live?’). Freedom may be in contrast with acceptance. The second paradox noted by Marar concerns wanting to break free as against wanting to belong. Based on these contradictory elements, Marar concludes that happiness is not a balance but a juxtaposition of simultaneous opposites. In this view, happiness is a butterfly that is always beyond our reach, but will come to us if we do not try to catch it. (Marar 2003) A similar idea has been captured by many authors; as John Stuart Mill put it: “Ask yourself if you are happy, and you cease to be so”.

For Marar (2003), balancing conflicting forces is impossible. Happiness is not a static state but a question of pursuit. Quite similarly, the psychologist Daniel Nettle (2005) has noted that happiness serves us best as a goal rather than as an achievement – a goal to encourage us to strive. The journey is what matters. Nettle has further suggested that natural selection has endowed us with an implicit theory about what makes us happy which is false by design. In other words, our tendency to be mistaken in our beliefs about what will make us happy is a particularly cruel

trick played by our evolved mind to keep us competing. Such a ‘happiness system’ allows us to feel satisfied with life yet remain convinced at the same time that if only we had more of something, we would be truly happy. This of course also relates to the mechanisms noted above in relation to the “development paradox”.

The findings above reflect both the notions discussed by Marar and Nettle. At the same time, this is not the whole picture. The findings seem in part to contradict the view that happiness is not a balance; if not happiness, at least the good life may be in balance. Yet this experience of the good life in balance is, at the same time, a reflection of simultaneous opposites (the notion emphasized by Marar): it is a question of *balance* between two *opposite poles* (e.g., the poles of sorrow and moments of happiness). It is thus a question of *both* balance *and* opposites. For Marar, happiness is not a state but a pursuit, but the present findings seem to indicate that the *core* of the *pursuit* may have *most* to do with the balance itself. The good life also requires a sustainable balance between the present and the future. All in all, the basic message that the seven steps along ‘the arrow towards the good life’ thus offers us is the hopeful notion that if we strive for the good life, perhaps the colours and delight of the butterfly – to refer to Marar (2003) – may not be so far out of our reach.

Taken together, the findings of this study seem to reflect very well our ‘one step back’ in the beginning of this article: the classics of philosophy. Aristotelian idea of the golden mean, the happy medium is the core of individual experiences of good life illustrated by this study. Simple is beautiful: people prefer balanced rather than ecstatic life. Furthermore, the findings resonate very well also to the neo-Aristotelian views on social ties (e.g., MacIntyre 1999; MacIntyre 1981): dependence and independence go hand-in-hand; experiences of care and love make us individuals (i.e., partly independent), and individuals are then capable also of virtuous acts of love, care, and altruism towards others. It is these social ties – together with the balance of joy and sorrow – that form the ultimate cornerstone of the experiences of good life in everyday life.

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