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The four types of happiness. A theoretical foundation of research on subjective well-being based on Weber's theory of action

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Abstract

Many results have been produced in research on happiness/ Subjective Well-Being (SWB) but some were quite unexpected. These can be attributed to shortcomings in SWB theory and research. It is argued that sociology can contribute fruitfully by drawing on Weber's concept of sociology as a science of reality. Happiness is defined as an attitude that includes emotional, cognitive and motivational-conative aspects. Four types of SWB can be distinguished, following Weber's typology of four forms of social action: well-being based on traditional/ habitual actions; satisfaction based on purposeful actions; happiness based on love relationships; and life satisfaction or life fulfilment based on a meaning- and value-oriented life orientation. Empirical studies are then summarized which prove the existence of these four types of SWB and their causes. In this approach, the paradoxes of previous research can be explained and new questions for research can be formulated.

Subjective well-being (SWB) – also referred to as life satisfaction, happiness and life fulfilment – has become a much-discussed research topic in recent decades (Davies 2015; Cieslik 2017). Publications have been released by psychologists (the most notable of whom are A. Campbell, M. Eysenck, M. Argyle, Ed Diener, D.G. Myers, M. Seligman, D.G. Blanchflower, M. Csikszentmihalyi, S. Lyubomirski), economists (B. Frey, A.K. Dutt, J.Steedman, J.E. Stiglitz, R. Skidelski, J.A. McGregor; A. Clark, P. Frijters, J.F. Helliwell), sociologists and political scientists (M. Fabian, L.W. Milbrath, W. Glatzer, W. Zapf, H.H. Noll, R. E. Lane, A.C. Michalos, R. Veenhoven, R. Inglehart, J. Delhey, M. Schroeder). There are also general introductions, handbooks and interdisciplinary readers about SWB (Cambell et al. 1976; Eysenck 1990; Argyle 1999; Rapley 2003; Kahnemann et al. 2003; Philips 2006; Dutt/ Ratciff 2009; Ahmed 2010; Steedman et al. 2010; Bormans 2012; Land et al. 2012; Bache/ Scott 2018; Searle et al. 2022; Maggin20223) and a Journal of Happiness Studies. Philosophy has been addressing the topic since ancient times (Guha/ Carson 2017). The topic has also been recognised by politicians; many countries and international institutions (OECD, UN) have defined it as an explicit goal and collect systematic data on it (Veenhoven 2007; Cabanas/ Illouz 2019, 48; Mahoney 2023). The World Happiness Report (H Helliwell et al. 2025 and earlier) and the OECD Better Life Index are published annually. The central argument of all these approaches is that it is not enough to increase economic prosperity and expand the welfare state if this does not also lead to a higher subjective quality of life (Sen 1999; Noll/Christoph 2003; Cummins et al. 2009; Stiglitz et al. 2010; Helliwell et al. 2018, 2021).

This article begins by critically outlining the state of research and highlighting gaps and inconsistencies in psychological and economic happiness research. The main part of the article argues that Weber's concept of sociology as a science of reality can open a new theoretical approach. The perspective of social action is central to this; based on Weber's types of action, a distinction is made between four different forms of SWB. The meaningfulness of this differentiation is supported by numerous research findings. Finally, paradoxes in previous research are reinterpreted, some desiderata for further research are identified, and political implications of the approach are suggested.

ON THE STATE OF RESEARCH

Unexpected and inconsistent findings

Research on SWB has yielded many consistent results. It has been shown that people with good social integration and a secure economic existence are particularly satisfied, while divorced and unemployed people are less satisfied (Bradburn/ Caplovitz 1975; Myers 1993, 2000; Christoph/Noll 2003; Graham et al. 2004; Haller/Hadler 2006; Powdharee 2008; Schroeder 2021; Felbermayr 2017; Helliwell 2018, 2025; Joshanloo 2023).

However, there are also a number of findings that are difficult to interpret and even inconsistent. Women are reported to be more satisfied than men, even though they are more burdened and disadvantaged in many respects (Haller/Hadler 2006; Becchetti/Conzo 2021; Blanchflower/Bryson 2023; Schröder 2023; Kaiser et al. 2025). Income only increases SWB up to a certain threshold (Fuentes/ Rojas 2001; Clark et al. 2018). Even among the poor (such as slum dwellers in Calcutta, cf. Biswas/ Diener 2001), there are often satisfied people, and among the rich, there are dissatisfied people. Children, widely regarded as the greatest enrichment in life, do not clearly lead to greater happiness (Baumeister 1991; Glass et al 2016; Musick et al. 2016; Riederer 2018; Schröder 2021; Bello 2024). Health, which respondents themselves consider to be the most important factor for

satisfaction (Delhey 2004, 37ff.), does not determine well-being as strongly as one might expect; even disability does not always lead to a significant reduction in SWB (Michalos et al. 2001; Birbaumer/ Zittlau 2014; Fraberger 2017; Asanga et al. 2023). Over the course of a lifetime, satisfaction seems to follow a U-shaped curve: High in adolescence, declining to a middle value and then rising again (Blanchflower/ Oswald 2004; Lyubomirski et al. 2005; Köcher/ Raffelshüschen 2011,52ff; Cheng et al. 2015; Beja 2017; Gmeiner/ Gschwandner 2025).

Even at the macro level, there is no linear relationship between a country's socio-economic standard of living (GDP per capita) and the life satisfaction of its population. The latter tends to increase with rising prosperity, but only up to a certain level (the so-called welfare paradox; Easterlin 1974; Haller/ Hadler 2004, 2006; Frey 2008; Kahnemann/ Deaton 2010; Rojas 2018; Helliwell 2025). The differences between countries concern not only the extent but also the significance of SWB (Vitterso et al. 2002; Baltatescu 2007; Veenhoven 2012). To this day, the pursuit of success and the 'dream of happiness' are among the central goals of Americans (Willi 1966; Münch 1986; Diener/ Diener 1995). This is not the case in other cultures. In Islam (and, in principle, also in Christianity), true happiness is primarily associated with the afterlife (Mohamed 2019). In Asian countries, happiness is not only viewed positively (Uchida et al. 2004; Cieslik 2017). Buddhism and Hinduism call for turning away from earthly desires and possessions, recognising the omnipresence of suffering and adopting an equanimous attitude towards the world (Reichle 1994; Brück 1998; Roscoe 2005). For many Chinese, the question of happiness seems incomprehensible (Bormans 2012, 254). In Japan, there is a widespread belief that happiness leads to inattention and can have fatal consequences.

Some of the "inconsistent" findings, however, may be due simply to statistical errors in in the statistical analyses. The asserted "gender paradox" in life satisfaction may be due a misleading inclusion of socio-demographic "control" variables; but when gender is the focal variable, no additional variables have to be controlled for, because they do not determine both gender and life satisfaction (Bartram 2022). If only gender is included as independent variable, it has no effect. A similar erroneous conclusion occurs in relation to the age effect. Here, the naïve belief in statistical significance has led researchers to assert a substantive variation (Bartram 2024). A comparative analysis of patterns in single countries shows that significant variations in the age-happiness relations exist between them. (Below, I will also present substantive and empirical analyses against the purported u-shape of happiness over the life cycle). The inconsistent findings and inconsistencies mentioned are also related to a number of weaknesses or 'blind spots' in research on subjective quality of life. Let us shortly have a look at them.

Problems and under-exposed aspects of happiness research

Firstly, it should be noted that the extensive SWB research has a weak theoretical basis (as already noted by Diener 1984; Chamberlain 1988; for more recent discussions, see Diener et al. 2018; Joshanloo 2024)). The terms subjective quality of life, happiness and life satisfaction are used indiscriminately in theory, often on the grounds that they mean the same thing and are strongly correlated (Levy/Guttman 1975; Guttman/Levy 1982; Bormans 2012, 9; Diener/Inglehart 2013). Since happiness is dependent on the individual, culture and time, it makes little sense to try to define it precisely (Frey/Frey Marti 2010). Rather, it is better to start from an empirically based definition (Fabian 2022). This argument fails to recognize that good empirical evidence and theory always (must) develop together. Approaches that define a multitude of indicators as relevant for SWB are also unsatisfactory; in many cases, no clear distinction is made between causes and indicators of SWB (Cummins 2005). The theoretical weakness of SWB research is reflected in the most important

research instruments. To measure SWB, a standardized, simple question with five or ten categories (very unhappy to very happy or satisfied) and two scales for positive and negative emotions are used (Ackerman 2019). The fact that all these instruments can be collected and applied everywhere does not prove that they are also satisfactory in terms of content (Cobb/Rixford 1998).

The second shortcoming of happiness research is the insufficient consideration of the relevance of action. It is not only in everyday understanding that happiness is often portrayed as a (positive) feeling. There is no consensus in SWB research on what happiness is – most see it, in line with everyday understanding, as an emotion. From a sociological point of view, however, it is not just a feeling, but a persistent experience that is also linked to cognition and social action.

A third shortcoming of happiness research is the theoretical underrepresentation of unhappiness, pain and suffering (Gundelach/Kreiner 2004; Wilkinson/Kleinmann 2016). The topic hardly appears in the influential field of 'positive psychology' (Seligman 2017). Economists have developed 'misery indices' (Hanke 2023) that are calculated solely from social statistical macro data (unemployment, inflation rates). This one-sidedness of SWB researchers corresponds to a social trend in modern times, in which suffering, illness, dying and death are outsourced to professional institutions (Giddens 1991,161). The fact is that even 'normal' social relationships can lead to stress and serious conflicts; they have a particularly strong (in this case negative) effect on SWB (Rook 1984; Brooks et al. 2011).

A fourth weakness of happiness research is the neglect of the time aspect, although there are now some panel studies on this (e.g. Winkelmann/Winkelmann 1998; Graham et al. 2004; Buecker et al. 2023; Mahoney 2023). In surveys, the main source of happiness research, SWB is usually only recorded as a state at a specific point in time. The duration of happiness-related activities and feelings and their embedding in the past and (expected) future, their embedding in the whole life story, is rarely addressed. However, many activities only gain meaning through their reference to a desired, distant goal or the expectation of achieving something important, beautiful or great.

Fifthly, there is the individualistic orientation. This characterizes particularly psychological research, but also the economics of happiness (Frey/Stutzer 2007). This orientation is justified to a certain extent. In fact, SWB is 30% to 50% biologically and genetically predetermined (DeNeve/Cooper 1998; Lyubomirsky et al. 2005; Nettle 2008). The Big Five personality traits of emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness have a positive effect on happiness, while neuroticism has a negative effect (Köcher/ Raffelshüschen 2011, 45; Pishwa et al. 2011; Busseri/Erb 2024). Each person also has a typical level of happiness (set point of happiness) to which they return after significant ups and downs (Diener 2000; Lucas 2007; Hüfür/Gerstorf 2018;). This corresponds to the biological-physiological fact that all organisms react to changing conditions in such a way that they maintain a constant internal environment (Menninger 1974, 79ff.). However, the individual focus of the research must also be questioned: because happiness and unhappiness arise primarily in interpersonal relationships, immediate living conditions and the socio-political context have significant effects. In his 'positive psychology,' M. Seligman (2017) showed that a negative view of one's own life history reinforces pessimism and feelings of unhappiness, while an optimistic view and active behavior promote SWB (see also Madeson 2017; Frederickson 2011). The thesis that happiness can be achieved largely through self-improvement and corresponding psychological know-how has become influential in a variety of applications in life counselling, coaching and self-help literature; it also generates social pressure (Cabanas/Illouz 2019, 72). In economic organizations, it is propagated that one should seek happy employees and design working conditions in such a way that they lead to their greater feeling good (Atkinson 2013; White 2017).

The sixth bias in dominant happiness research concerns the insufficient consideration of the social level, the macro context. Structural conditions are either neglected altogether or examined only as external, objective framework conditions with effects on SWB. For example, international comparisons usually only use a blanket variable 'country' or the summary variable of GDP per capita. However, we know that this variable is closely linked to many other macro variables; their relevance decreases significantly or disappears altogether when other variables are included (Veenhoven 2000; Haller/Hadler 2004; Inglehart et al. 2008). The operationalization of social and cultural characteristics of entire societies using only a single characteristic (e.g. individualistic vs. collectivist cultures) is also questionable.

The ambivalent attitude of sociologists towards happiness

Pioneering work in SWB research has been done primarily by psychology and economics. However, sociology can also make a fruitful contribution here; all findings show that genuine happiness is primarily guaranteed by social relationships. Nevertheless, SWB is not a central topic in sociology. Happiness still played an important role for classical sociologists such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Durkheim 1964; summarized in Cieslik 2017, 69-83). However, they were all skeptical as to whether the chances of happiness would increase in the course of development: rising suicide rates, increasing alienation at work and social rationalization would seem to suggest the opposite. For Frankfurt critical theory (Adorno, Marcuse), happiness is also a simplistic metaphor for consumer society, which focuses on pleasure and enjoyment; the modern culture and entertainment industry is a kind of safety valve that undermines autonomy and political awareness. For Eva Illouz, happiness research is a pseudoscience that contributes to the acceptance of existing, unjust conditions (Cabanas/Illouz 2019, 18ff.). This critical stance taken by sociologists on the subject of happiness is in line with the general tendency in sociology and the media to focus on social problems, to portray the world as far more threatening and hopeless than it really is, and to underestimate positive developments (Eckersley 2000; Rosling 2018; Delhey/Steckermeier 2019; Schröder 2021; Haller 2022, 2024). Happiness is not an issue at all in the major sociological theories of society (system theory, rational choice theory).

HAPPINESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The central thesis of this article is that Max Weber's theoretical approach enables a differentiated understanding of SWB. This section will elaborate on this point. To this end, we will first provide a brief outline of Weber's concept of sociology as a science of reality. We will then show that his four types of action open up a new and fruitful perspective on SWB.

Sociology as a science of reality according to Max Weber

The concept of sociology as a science of reality can be characterized by four basic assumptions (Weber 1964, 1973b; Kruse 1969; Haller 2003; Albert 2010; Schwinn 2014). Firstly, sociology is defined as the science of social action. Unlike behavior, action is characterized by the fact that it is associated with a meaning. This indicates the goals pursued by an actor and the means he uses to achieve them (Müller 2007, 107-118; Lichtblau 2006; Schwinn 2009; for an overview, see Miebach). A similar

approach is also taken by cognitive psychology (Aebli 1980; Cranach et al. 1980), Marxist psychology (Sève 1973) and some psychoanalysts (Erikson 1973; Menninger 1974; Fromm 2011).

The importance of action is also evident in the case of happiness and satisfaction, as can be demonstrated by six facts. (1) Being active is in itself a major factor in happiness; conversely, experiences of happiness lead to a person performing a related activity with much more enthusiasm and success. Active leisure activities such as walking, physical activity and sport not only promote health and life expectancy (Warburton 2006; Mahindru et al. 2023; Lenart-Bugla et al. 2022; Nehls 2014), but also SWB (Köcher/ Raffelshüschen 2011,131). Watching television is the least enjoyable activity and can even reduce well-being (Park et al. 2009; Haller et al. 2013; Wang 2012; Zhang/Chen 2019). Today, this also applies to excessive smartphone and internet use (Barrick et al. 2022; Leitao et al. 2024). (2) Pleasure and happiness are highest in an evident social act, erotic-sexual union (Loewit 1992; Layard 2005,27; Regan 2024). (3) One of the most important discoveries in happiness psychology was that of 'flow' – the fact that you forget everything around you when you are fully immersed in a demanding and exciting activity (Csikszentmihaly 1992). (4) People must be free to a certain extent if they want to act, i.e. consciously and reflectively, to do something specific. The feeling of having control over one's own life situation is one of the most important determinants of SWB (Sen 1999; Haller/Hadler 2004; Inglehart et al. 2008; Verme 2009; Helliwell 2025). (4) Experiences of unhappiness are also linked to activity. Boredom is a widespread, modern phenomenon and its most negative experience (Bellebaum 1990; Fromm 2007; Ohlmeier 2023). (5) The most important single factor leading to low SWB is also closely linked to the aspect of activity, namely unemployment (Lucas et al. 2004; Helliwell et al. 2018; Barros et al. 2019; Schroeder 2021).

A central theoretical and methodological tool is the concept of the ideal type. An ideal type is a sharply defined concept that can be used to capture and interpret empirical phenomena more precisely in conceptual and theoretical terms (Weber 1973b; Kaesler 2003). It emphasizes certain aspects of reality particularly strongly, even exaggerating them. The focus is on their cultural significance and their relation to social values. Weber also developed fundamental ideal types regarding social action. These are traditional or habitual action, purpose-rational action, affective action and value-rational action. The central theoretical assumption of this article is that, based on these types of action, four different forms of happiness/satisfaction can also be distinguished: well-being, satisfaction, happiness and life satisfaction/fulfilment.

The third aspect of happiness research from the perspective of reality sociology is the significance of time. Actions and sequences of actions have a beginning and an end and must be viewed against the backdrop of personal past and expected or planned future (cf. Welzer 2002; Pohl 2007; Nehls 2014,63-76; Monier/ Gessmann 2015). Following on from cognitive psychology, four time phases can be distinguished (Aebli 1980; Cranach et al. 1980): (a) Moments of happiness (or unhappiness) are subjective experiences in the context of a specific event. Such 'moments of the present' (Stern 2005; Bellebaum/ Hettlage 2019) bring with them the most intense experiences of happiness (but also unhappiness) and, even if they occur rarely, can be significant for well-being. (b) Situations relevant to happiness can be described as longer periods of time, experienced as a whole, lasting several hours. They are the time frame in which most clearly defined events and experiences take place. (c) Life stages are marked by important transitions (starting school, graduating, starting a new job, having a child, retiring). These phases of one or two decades, in which one lives under relatively constant conditions and with specific tasks, are associated with a typical level of SWB (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). (d) The lifetime perspective involves an assessment of one's entire life course, which results from looking at one's own past and prospects for the future. Historical time is also important; perceptions of what constitutes happiness have changed over the last few decades, as an English study

has shown (McHugh et al. 2017). My thesis is that the four types of SWB are relatively clearly related to these time periods (see Figure 1). Well-being arises in a kind of 'timeless present': one is satisfied with one's current life and does not wish for any significant change. Satisfaction through the pursuit of clearly defined goals relates primarily to stages of life. Happiness can refer to multiple phases in time: to passionate, exhilarating moments in the present, close relationships with partners in certain stages of life, but also to life as a whole. Life satisfaction or fulfilment arises from a reflective view of life.

Fourthly, the framework conditions of action, the situational context, must also be conceptualized sociologically to enable genuine causal explanations – the understanding of the meaning of actions and statistical evidence of their occurrence under certain conditions. In most SWB research, non-structural framework conditions or causal factors are defined in advance and then their 'effects' on SWB are examined (Greco/Stenner 2013). From a realistic sociological perspective, an interaction between the two is assumed: objective reality only gains significance for action through the subjective perception and interpretation of the actors. Furthermore, actors can choose specific contexts or modify them in line with their own goals. The value orientations of the actors and the institutionally anchored and represented values interact in this process. At the level of society as a whole and in international comparisons, the aim is to identify the specific structural conditions (e.g. political systems) and fundamental social values as embodied in religions, secular ideologies and the institutions influenced by them.

What is happiness?

What do the terms subjective well-being (SWB), happiness and life satisfaction mean? There is little conceptual clarity on this. The thesis that satisfaction is a cognition and happiness an affect has been empirically proven to be untenable (Crooker/Near (1998). The thesis that SWB represents a rationally unreflective emotion also appears untenable (Veenhoven 2009b). SWB is neither a motive nor a value, as is sometimes claimed. Rather, it can only be described using the vague term "attitude". This refers to attitudes that are shared by several people, relate positively or negatively to an object and thus become relevant to action (Güttler 2000, 95ff.). Three components are central to attitudes: the cognitive (perceptions, opinions, beliefs), the affective (the evaluative judgement of objects) and the conative-motivational, action-related component. SWB also contains these three dimensions (cf. Guttman 1950; Guttman/Levy 1982). It is evident that the affective component is central to SWB, while the conative, action-related component may be more in the background; but it is also relevant. People associate the concept of happiness with a practical interest and actively strive to remain at this level (Haybron 2003). For N. Branden (1969), the pursuit of happiness is a moral duty. Satisfaction represents an assessment of one's life situation; it indicates not only good living conditions, but above all that one has the most important problems under control. People therefore become active in order to be reasonably satisfied and not have to see their lives as failure in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, thus avoiding the associated shame (Shils 1982, 143-175; Giddens 1991,153). This can also be expressed in physical habitualization, such as a friendly, open facial expression versus a frustrated, dismissive one (Redican 2013). From all this it follows that positive SWB will predominate; Durkheim (1964,243) already noted this.

Subjective well-being and identity

When discussing SWB, the aspect of self-image and identity, which Weber did not address, must also be included. There is extensive philosophical, social psychological and sociological literature on this topic (for an overview, see Weigert et al. 1986; Abels 2006; Müller 2011). Identity represents the totality of points of reference and order that determine an individual's orientation and actions; it

includes the feeling of an inner unity of the self and its continuity while changing life circumstances (Mead 1968; Erikson 1973; Haller 2003, 569). A central element of identity is its recognition by others (Mead 1968; Honneth 1998). A clear sense of identity only developed in modern societies; in line with their high degree of differentiation, identity is multidimensional, characterized by a specific set of characteristics of an individual (Simmel 1923; Giddens 1991; Haller/Müller 2009).

Subjective well-being is closely related to the dimension of identity. The basic mechanism for generating high SWB is to view oneself positively and to present this to others (Goffman 1967; Cummins/Nistico 2002). This is expressed in three processes: by attributing positive characteristics to oneself, by overestimating the extent of one's self-control, and by having optimistic expectations for the future. None of these assessments can be described as illusions because they are not made by comparison with an objectively measurable reality, but only according to one's own internal standards or by comparison with close friends and groups (whose status may also be perceived in a distorted manner). It is therefore primarily a matter of developing a positive self-assessment, a corresponding sense of self-worth and the closely related awareness of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura 1982; Baumeister et al. 2003; Neyer/Asendorpf 2018). George H. Mead (1976, 329) used the term 'functional superiority' to describe this, the feeling that one is better than others in a comparable situation in very specific aspects (referred to by Thorndike as the halo effect).

All of this also applies to the topic of SWB (Fuentes/ Rojas 2001). People tend to overestimate their own happiness (Headey/ Wearing 1988; 1992; Schimmack et al. 2009). A life that is considered happy is also considered good in other aspects (Nozick 1989). A high SWB assessment has positive effects on behavior, at least in Western cultures (Seligman 2017; Uchida et al. 2004). High dissatisfaction, on the other hand, may be less beneficial, leading to passivity and making it difficult to live with others. The relevance of the four types of SWB is also decisively influenced by people's self-image and identity. People will generally attach the greatest importance to those forms of action in which they believe they can become or remain successful and happy.

THE FOUR TYPES OF ACTION AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Based on these basic principles, the four types of action and their correlates in subjective well-being will now be presented (see Synopsis 1 and Synopsis 2). Four assumptions are central here: (1) All types of action correspond to specific forms of well-being. (2) All four also involve negative aspects of suffering and unhappiness. (3) The four types are primarily expressed in different social contexts and have different relevance in different phases of life. Thus, the most important areas of life – partnership, family, career, leisure – are relevant to all forms of subjective well-being, but to varying degrees (cf. also Schwinn 2020). (4) The same applies at the socio-cultural level: social structures and institutions promote or inhibit specific forms of subjective well-being.

Habitual behavior: well-being through following familiar traditions and routines

According to Weber, traditional or habitual behavior encompasses 'the bulk of established everyday behavior'.

Habits are of great, often underestimated importance in social life. Their function is to transform beneficial behaviors into established routines, i.e. to habitualize them; in the case of positive behaviors, these can then be referred to as virtues. Traditions can be described as the collective wealth of experience of entire generations and societies. Habits also have negative sides. Bad habits can turn into addictions, and rigid traditions can become a stumbling block for innovation and progress.

Synopsis 1 The four types of social behavior, subjective well-being and the particularly relevant time perspectives in each case

Type of social behavior	**Type of subjective well-being (SWB)**	**Typical time perspective**
Habitual behavior, traditional behavior	Wellbeing	Timeless present
Purposeful action	Satisfaction (pride)	Phases of life
Emotional behavior	Happiness (social imbedding)	The present moments, phases of life, life as a whole
Value-rational action	Life satisfaction (life fulfilment, peace of mind)	Life as a whole

At first glance, it may not be obvious that habitual action is related to happiness. We normally associate habits with every day, trivial, often boring activities, and social traditions with rather unpopular obligations. Even repetitive work does not generate well-being (Durkheim 1964,243). In fact, following habits and traditions can very well generate comfort, security and satisfaction, even strong bonds and emotions; this even applies to the many small comforts of everyday life (Scitovsky 1976). They are also maintained to avoid the inconveniences that changing or giving them up would cause. One example is regular and sufficient sleep, which is essential for health and well-being (Menninger 1974, 240; Walker 2017, 320ff.; De Neve 2025). With Charles Taylor (1995), one can say that most people's desires concern ‘ordinary life,’ their concept of the good life refers to everyday family and work life, while grand, far-reaching goals and ideals are hardly relevant (empirical evidence for this can be found in B. Müller 2011, 211). A pleasant, well-being-inducing way of life consists of everything going its usual way and being able to rely on established relationships. These take place in a stable neighborhood and environment, where one is familiar with the organizations and institutions one deals with and has come to terms with their pitfalls.

The existence of such a type of happines is empirically confirmed. In a German study by J. Allmendinger et al. (2017, 79), respondents were asked to select their preferred sensory stimulus (from surfaces such as glass, scents such as roses, rhythms, etc.). The most popular was cotton wool. People who chose this value social belonging, pay attention to health, enjoy life and see their home and gainful employment as places of stability (Allmendinger 2017,79). Giddens (1991,126) wrote that many people today build a protective cocoon around themselves that creates security in the face of a changing environment. The same seems to apply throughout Europe: a good job, adequate housing and living with a partner were cited as the three most important conditions for a good life (Delhey 2004). When it comes to work, job security is the top priority (Fritsch et al. 2019). The term well-being may be appropriate for this type of SWB.

Synopsis 2: The four types of subjective well-being and their positive and negative characteristics

Type of subjective well-being	**Positive characteristics**	**Negative characteristics**
Wellbeing	Security, reliability, safety	Routinization, uncritical conformism, addictions
Satisfaction (pride)	Success, achievement	Pressure to perform, frustration from unachieved goals, arrogance
Happiness (social embeddedness)	Love relationships, full recognition as a person, social integration	Negative social relationships, insults, hatred, violence
Life satisfaction, life fulfilment,	Meaningful life, reflective observance of ethical principles	Churlisness , sullen character, moroseness

As already indicated, habits are strongly linked to the context in which they are practized (Neal et al. 2012). Three contextual elements are central here: the spatial, social and political-territorial environment (see also Fuller/Atkinson 2012). In addition to the home, the spatial environment includes the neighborhood and community, as well as the social capital that can be built upon in these contexts (Gitell/ Vidal 1998; Hawkins/ Maurer 2010; Smith/ Reid 2018). The home and its everyday items are very important for the well-being of its inhabitants (Habermas 1999, 122-130). A well-equipped, personally furnished home creates a sense of security and has great symbolic power; living together in a home provides someone to talk to and protects against boredom (Glenn 1975; Headey et al. 1984). Thus, it is not being married that increases SWB but living together (Gundelach/Kreiner 2004). Pets can also play an important role in this regard. Their presence increases satisfaction almost as much as friendships (Gmeiner/Gschwandtner 2025). The great importance of familiar surroundings is also evidenced by the widespread resistance to moving into a retirement or nursing home. At the turn of the century, satisfaction with one's home, family life and neighborhood were the highest of all sub-categories of satisfaction in Europe (Delhey 2004, 21). The positive functions of a home apply even more to owner-occupied homes; advertising for them explicitly uses terms such as well-being and images of happy families, even if expectations are often disappointed, for example due to underestimated costs and efforts (Bourdieu 2002, Odermatt/Stutzer 2022). Moving house will have a positive effect if circumstances improve, but it can also cause stress if it happens very frequently, especially for children (Gerber 1984; Krey n.d.; Mataloni 2023). The same applies to migration. It can bring advantages to both the countries of immigration and the migrants themselves (Hendricks 2021), but it can also lead to a thinning out or even severing of relationships in the country of origin and (especially among older people) lead to loneliness (Bormans 2012, 155; Hofbauer 2018; Haller 2019; Uslukan 2024).

Habits and traditions, or their disruption and disregard, can also become very significant at the socio-political level. Numerous uprisings and wars have broken out not because of impoverishment, but because those in power took away the traditional habits and rights of their subjects and imposed new obligations (taxes, military service) on them. Time and again, increases in the prices of everyday goods lead to demonstrations and uprisings, not only in poorer countries. A significant deterioration in

living conditions, such as that which occurred in post-communist countries in the early days, also has an impact on the declining SWB of the population (Haller/Hadler 2006). The political and territorial environment is also relevant. Poor and rich countries differ not only in terms of people's incomes, but also in terms of infrastructural living conditions. Life in the air-polluted and chaotic megacities and impoverished rural regions of the global South is full of adversity and danger. It can be assumed that escaping such conditions is one of the main motives for young people to undertake life-threatening migrations from the South to the North. As a result, these countries are at the bottom of the scale in terms of SWB (Helliwell 2025).

Habitual behavior and the resulting well-being are also important in gainful employment. In addition to providing income, work has many other functions: it structures the daily and annual routine, opens continuous social contacts and confers social prestige (Jahoda 1982). In this sense, it contributes to SWB in terms of well-being (Schulz/Pichler 2005; Unanue 2017). One of the most important findings of happiness research is also relevant here: unemployment is one of the few consistently important causes of low SWB (Winkelmann/Winkelmann 1998; Kasser/Ryan 2001; Lucas et al. 2004; Haller/Höllinger 2006; Schröder 2021, 111).

Habitual behavior can also have negative aspects and consequences for SWB. Bad habits are entrenched behaviors that are perceived as unpleasant by those around us. Rigid routines can lead to a narrowing of perceptions and problematic behaviors. So-called ‘bourgeois’ people (Kajetzke 2010) and people with a ‘bureaucratic character’ (Fromm 2015) shy away from the unpredictable, develop an urge to keep everything around them under rigid control and have an aversion to any change (Kajetzke 2010). Smoking, alcoholism and drug use can become addictive habits. Even in everyday life, there are many habits that are anything but conducive to happiness in the medium and long term. Problematic eating and drinking habits can lead to one of today's most widespread ‘common diseases’, obesity, but also to pathological anorexia; gambling addiction can ruin entire families (Nettle 2008, 136ff.).

Satisfaction and pride through achievement and success

Purposeful rational behavior occurs when a person pursues certain goals and, to achieve success, focuses on their own resources, the physical environment and the expectations of their social environment.

Such orientation usually relates to stages of life in which one can set such goals and achieve success (a high level of education, a management position, setting up a company). Focusing on such stages of life has gained importance in modern societies (Giddens 1991, 146).

Purposeful, rational, determined and persistent action can undoubtedly generate very positive experiences and feelings, especially when it is crowned with success. This remains stored in the memory and forms a treasure trove of experience that can provide lifelong support. The pride triggered by such achievements strengthens self-esteem and promotes further performance improvement (Täuber 2023; Seligman 2017, 165ff.). The winners of major sporting competitions repeatedly speak of incredibly positive feelings mixed with gratitude and pride when they are honored. People who set themselves simpler, achievable goals, work seriously and persistently to achieve them and make progress in the process are also happier (Little 1983; Brunstein 1993; Presseau et al. 2008). The term satisfaction seems most appropriate for all experiences of this kind. It refers directly to the gratification resulting from previous efforts, which is also expressed in the closely related term satisfaction. The feeling of pride can also be associated with this to a greater or lesser extent.

Purposeful action is at the heart of the tradition of utilitarianism. Its main message is that the fundamental goal of human beings is their well-being; this is highest when they experience as much pleasure and joy and as little pain and suffering as possible (Nozick 1993,122; Höffe 2013). The term "utility" was introduced as an umbrella term for this, and it continues to play a central role in economics and sociological rational choice theory today. Bentham already established a relationship between utility and happiness: 'The principle of utility is that principle which approves or disapproves of any action according to its tendency to increase or diminish the happiness of that group whose interests it concerns...'[1] Bentham also writes of the total utility of a society, which is given when as many of its members as possible are doing well (Layard 2005,131). B. Frey (2008) sees this concretization of the concept of utility through the concept of happiness as a 'revolution in economics'. British economists have presented a detailed approach to how all political measures can be assessed in terms of the happiness they can achieve (Frijters et al. 2019; see also McGregor / Pouw 2017). The basic assumption that SWB can be regarded as a concretization of the concept of utility only appears plausible at first glance.[2] However, the thesis that happiness is something that everyone strives for first and foremost is empirically inaccurate (Karwetzky et al. 2021; Müller B. 2011). Furthermore, the assumption that certain factors have the same effect on SWB everywhere is politically questionable; focusing on these factors can lead to the neglect of political measures that have only a minor effect on happiness; the whole thing amounts to a technocratic-elitist policy from above (Singh/Alexandrowa 2020; Cobb/Rixford 1998). Kant (1968, 133) already warned against viewing happiness as an objective or even normative criterion for action because it has a strongly idiosyncratic component.

However, lasting happiness can hardly be achieved based on purely utility-related, purpose-rational actions alone. There are several reasons for this. For example, the desired goal does not live up to expectations. A relevant example of this is all kinds of games of chance (lottery, etc.); although the level of happiness rises sharply after winning, it soon falls back to its previous level (Brickman et al. 1978). In addition, many lottery winners underestimate the new problems that arise. Another problematic aspect of purpose-rational happiness is its restriction on specific, limited purposes. Financially purchasable goods and services only generate superficial pleasure, and the gain in pleasure and happiness is short-lived; the status gain achieved is soon devalued because of the dynamics of social comparison (Plack 1967, 58ff.; Delhey 2013, 165). The desire to acquire and possess as many things as possible or to engage in as many activities as possible can lead to stress. The first aspect has been widely criticized as modern 'consumerism' since the work of Thorstein Veblen (1971; Fromm 2011). Whether shopping, one of the most popular leisure activities today, can produce genuine satisfaction is questionable (Bierhoff 2016; Rosa 2016). The same applies to the pleasure gained from what has been acquired; many things (e.g. clothes) are discarded after a single use or never used at all. Social acceleration, the increase in the pace of many activities, may increase the number of possible sources of satisfaction, but at the same time devalue their intrinsic meaning, creating a hedonistic treadmill. It is also relevant that the experiences of success and happiness described above in professional, sporting and other top performances often must be paid for with immense effort and deprivation. Today, athletes are often selected at an early age and subsequently subject to grueling training programs. Added to this is the pressure to perform from parents, coaches and clubs; together with their own ambition, this often leads them to use performance-enhancing but harmful doping (Flett/Hewitt 2005; Reardon/Credo 2014). For those who are not successful, all this can lead to negative assessments of their entire career and even to a descent into drugs and other addictions (Breuer/Hallmann 2013; Rice et al. 2016). The problem of a strong drive for success is also evident in the world of work, especially in the 'success society' of the United States (Taylor 1974,99), where a tough ego is required. The proportion of narcissistic personalities with psychopathic tendencies (such

as a lack of empathy) is higher among top managers (Hossiep/Ringelband 2014). A lack of work-life balance and burnout can lead women in management positions to often quit and switch to more ‘humane’ fields of work (such as social services) (Pinker 2008).

Finally, it is problematic that a means-end orientation has also become widespread in the search for partners and in erotic-sexual relationships. Dating apps make many partners visible and enable countless, albeit virtual, contacts. The focus is on optimal self-presentation. However, the contacts usually remain non-binding, with screening and maximisation at the forefront (Illouz 2011), and it is easy to break off contact abruptly (ghosting, according to Soliman 2019). With such a ‘Disneyfication’ of social relationships, it is not possible to really get to know someone (Hillenkamp 2009). ‘Pure relationships’ of this kind will only be maintained as long as they offer the individual sufficient gratification (Giddens 1991).

Happiness through love relationships and social integration

According to Weber, an action is emotional if it is guided by feelings and emotions. However, its significance is underestimated by him and other theorists (such as Parsons). As a starting point, three types of emotions can be distinguished here: background emotions such as discomfort, nervousness, primary social emotions such as sadness, joy, anger, and secondary social emotions such as pride, joy, fear (Gerhards 1988; Damasio 1999; Rost 2001, 51ff.). The majority of all affects and emotions relate to interpersonal relationships (love, hate, envy, pride, etc.). The cognitive element is highest in secondary social emotions and lowest in primary emotions (Aebli 1980; Cranach et al. 1980). The most consistent finding in happiness research is that SWB is primarily promoted by close social relationships (Argyle 1987; Myers 1993, 2000; Haller/Hadler 2006; Diener/Biswas-Diener 2008; Blanchflower 2009; Veenhoven 2012; Delhey/ Dragolov 2016; Clark et al. 2018; Schroeder 2021; Helliwell et al. 2025). Maintaining close social ties is the most important motive for humans (Scheff 1990,4), and social ties hold society together (Etzioni 1997; Köppl 2013). Particularly relevant here are deep, often lifelong erotic-sexual partnerships, relationships between parents and children, relatives (e.g. between adult siblings, grandparents and grandchildren) and close friends (Naroll 1983,223ff.; Lewis et al. 2015). They represent an important psychosocial resource throughout life, especially during difficult life events (Greco et al. 2015). All these relationships are characterised by being comprehensive, to a certain extent unconditional and, as a rule, permanent (Rapsch 2004; Haller 2016). Love is more than a feeling; it implies awareness and action. It is about mutual affection and unconditional acceptance of each other's personalities in mutual behavior, mutual care and repeatedly putting one's own interests aside (Dalai Lama 2014; Erikons 2024). Love relationships can therefore never be replaced by purposeful, temporary acquaintances and contacts. For adults, therefore, the partner relationship is the most important relationship for promoting happiness (Glenn/Weaver 1981). But the biosocial relationships between parents and children are also very close. The mother-child relationship is the deepest of all because a woman's baby grows in her womb for nine months and continues to depend on a persistent close relationship with her in the following period. However, a growing child feels most secure when there are other caregivers besides the mother who look after it (Naroll 1983, 223ff.). The well-being of close relatives also accounts for a considerable part of concern about one's own well-being (Glatzer/Zapf 1984, 393).

If such relationships are permanent, a person will feel truly happy. They remain relevant even if people move away from each other geographically during their lives (Becker et al. 2019). Romantic love, eroticism and sexuality, the closest form of social interaction, are associated with the highest experiences of pleasure and happiness (Regan 2024; Alberoni 1983). Falling in love is not something extremely rare and only relevant to young people but can happen repeatedly from childhood to old age (Scramaglia 2000). Even at the age of 74, Goethe wrote one of the most beautiful love poems in his

Marienbad Elegies. Among ten dimensions of social identity, belonging to a family is by far the most important worldwide (Müller/Haller 2009). Being embedded in social relationships even makes dying more bearable. For example, single elderly people in Japan seek out 'grave friends for eternity' (*hakatomos*) to avoid having to die alone, as 30,000 other people do every year, and possibly having their bodies decay in their homes (Fritz 2024).

However, action is also essential for romantic relationships. People who love each other spend a lot of time together, do things together, care for and help each other. Such activities in turn strengthen and deepen their love (Sternberg 1988; Fromm 1995; Haller 2016; Marantz-Cohen 2025). Socializing ranks second among all activities that make people feel particularly happy (Layard 2005, 27). This probably also explains why moderate alcohol consumption promotes well-being (Köcher/Raffelshüschen 2011, 116; for Russia, Graham et al. 2004). Erotic-sexual love can only last if it develops into genuine friendship (Greeley 1991; Loewit 1992; Soliman 2019, 185). The potential of romantic relationships to generate deep happiness is the central theme of literature across all cultures and eras. It shows that romantic relationships are culturally shaped. The portrayal of romantic relationships that defy all odds as well as those that fail dramatically influences what people expect from such relationships (Luhmann 1994).

Since social relationships are so important, it is obvious that they can also cause a great deal of pain and unhappiness. There are problematic, permanently negative social bonds (Rook 1984; Brooks et al. 2011). Relationship problems and family conflicts are at the top of the list of events that can trigger life crises (Müller 2011, 227). Rejected, disappointed and broken love is a major theme in the literature and music of all people. Divorce is one of the most important factors contributing to unhappiness. Jealousy can poison relationships of all kinds, turning them into their opposite and leading to hostility, vindictiveness and even violence (Krüger n.d.; Haller B. 2023). Relationships between parents and children can also be severely tested during life. An increasingly serious problem is the relationship between adults and their elderly relatives who need care. This can result in severe stress and moral dilemmas, especially for women (Haberkern/ Szydlik 2008; Birditt et al. 2017; Jung/Jopp 2018; Charenkova 2023). Social behavior motivated by hatred is often triggered by insults associated with anger. These can lead to irrational actions, bitterness and emotional disturbances (Haller R. 2017). Shame, which is often suppressed, is a central social emotion; the feeling of shame arises when one is rejected or even belittled by others (Scheff 1990, 1997). Sociological research on hatred and hateful behavior is still largely lacking (Manske 2011).

The growing problem of loneliness should also be mentioned here. It affects people who have lost their close relatives and are unable to form new relationships – such as elderly women living alone, but also young people. In 2018, British Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a 'Minister for Loneliness' after studies showed that nine million Britons suffer from loneliness. Even the status of singles, who are often envied, is by no means always freely chosen (Hradil 1995). Excessive use of television, the internet and social media can cause loneliness and depression and lead to a reduction in personal contacts and encounters (Lane 2001, p.102f.; Spitzer 2018, 133ff.). The use of these media requires no effort and provides immediate gratification – if only by eliminating boredom (one would probably have to speak here of (superficial) well-being in the above sense).

Life satisfaction (life fulfilment, peace of mind) through reflexive acceptance of all life experiences, circumstances and prospects

According to Weber, purely value-rational action is determined by a conscious belief in the unconditional intrinsic value of a particular action, regardless of its success (Weber 1964, 18; 1973b).

In his opinion, value convictions can be based on duty, dignity, beauty, religious instruction, piety, or the importance of a cause. From a sociological perspective, fundamental social values (such as security, freedom, human dignity) and ethical-moral norms are particularly noteworthy here (Willi 1966; Etzioni 1979; Shils 1982; Naroll 1983; Haller 2024, 2025). Acting in accordance with values and ethical norms does not simply mean always following them unconditionally and in all situations. In many situations, there are conflicts between different values, as well as between values and interests (Mead 1968; Münnich 2011; Haller 2022, 2024). In such cases, the actor must make a (value-)rational decision as to which value should be given preference. Emotions, their perception, recognition and reflection are also important here. Violations of values are condemned by fellow human beings and generate feelings of guilt and a bad conscience. Value-based decisions and actions can therefore be described as creative, because the actors must carefully consider which values are relevant in a situation, how they deal with value conflicts, and which options for action seem most acceptable (Wolfe 1989; Joas 1992).

Is happiness related to value-oriented behavior? Many happiness psychologists and economists do not ask themselves this question, either because values do not play a role in their theories or because they assume (often following sociologists) that today's culture no longer offers convincing, universally valid ethical principles (see Layard 2005, 107 following Bauman 2008). Respecting values and ethical norms may ease the conscience and occasionally lead to a good feeling, but it hardly leads to strong SWB. According to Kant, value-oriented behavior that is carried out to achieve well-being can at best generate self-satisfaction, but not real happiness (Walschots 2019). This is even less likely to be the case when difficult decisions must be made in the event of value conflicts. The opposite may even be the case – for example, if one later doubt whether one made the right decision, or if one feels sorry for those who are negatively affected by one's own decision. People who devote themselves entirely to serving others are by no means always happy, especially if their actions are based solely on a sense of duty or social pressure. Family members who put a great deal of effort into caring for relatives can, over time, become embittered by the heavy burden they bear – especially if their efforts are not recognized by the recipients (e.g. dementia patients) (Bohnet-Joschko/ Bidenko 2021). However, most family carers – especially women – still accept the associated burdens and efforts (ÖGK 2021). They describe themselves as satisfied and derive a positive feeling from their work, which can be described as inner contentment or fulfilment in life.

Value-based action can therefore also be linked to experiences of happiness. Kant (1968) already noted that happiness is not only a goal for every human being, but that it is even a moral duty to promote one's own happiness; for dissatisfaction, which arises from ‘a multitude of worries and unfulfilled needs’, can easily lead people to transgress their duties. Kantian ethics cannot be accused of being hostile to happiness; for him, the sensual experience of happiness and ethical-moral action are closely related, and only their harmony leads to true happiness (Kant 1968; Espinet 2015). This is achieved when one reflects on physical-sensual pleasure and indulges in it out of free will, thus placing it within the framework of ethical principles. For the philosopher Daniel Haybron (2003), happiness has an ethical component because it is a term frequently used by people with practical intentions. It has four functions: as an aid in fundamental decisions (such as choosing a career, assessing one's own or others' life situations); as a means of prognosis (one expects to enjoy oneself more in the company of happy people); and as an explanation for otherwise incomprehensible behavior (when a friend treats you unkindly). G. H. Mead (1968, 434f.) speaks of ‘morally grounded happiness’ when the goal of an action is ethically grounded and serves the common good. One such type is voluntary work, which is carried out by a significant proportion of the population without remuneration and for the benefit of third parties or a community (Musick/Wilson 2008; Antonovna/Yusupov 2021). Numerous studies show that voluntary social engagement increases the SWB of those involved (Brandl et al. 2009;

Lough 2019; Schröder 2021,129ff.; Jing et al. 2022). Young people who actively participate in prosocial activities report more positive experiences and find their lives more meaningful (Magen 1996; Lee/ Kawachi 2019). Conversely, a materialistic, possession-oriented lifestyle makes people less happy (Ryan/ Dziurawiecz 2001). These effects are probably also linked to the fact that religious people are happier (Headey et al. 2010). Religious communities require their followers to adhere to ethical and moral standards (Durkheim 1987,186; Myers 2000; Leikes 2002) and offer community experiences and mutual support. This is particularly true in societies where religion is highly important and there is significant inequality (Haller et al. 2009; Inglehart 2010; Eichhorn 2012). An analysis of the relationship using Schwartz's value scale found that the values of self-development and transcendence correlated positively with subjective well-being (Sortheix/ Schwartz 2017).

Professional activity can also be related to value orientations. For Charles H. Cooley (1918), professional success meant self-fulfillment in work that also had social significance and was useful to society. In this sense, anyone who performs their professional activities well with talent and training can be successful. In interviews, people in simple occupations often say that they are satisfied with their work and proud that they do it well, that they receive recognition from their customers and clients, and that they feel their work is useful to society. Surveys on attitudes to work show that the social significance of their work is very important to three-quarters of employees (Fritsch et al. 2019, 352; see also Seligman 2017, 165-177).

In this context, the question of the meaning of life, emphasized by depth psychologists Alfred Adler and Viktor Frankl, is important; it has also been taken up in psychological happiness research (Baumeister 1991; Ryan/Deci 2001; Kauppinen 2005; Baumeister et al. 2013; Martela/Steger 2016; Fang et al. 2024: Martela 2024; Schnell 2025). Frankl (1997) saw the lack of such a meaning in life in many people as the main cause of many psychological and social problems today. Psychologists developed a meaning-of-life scale for this purpose, operationalized by statements such as: ‘I generally feel that what I do in my life is meaningful and valuable.’ (Steger et al. 2006; Schutte et al. 2023) [3] In this sense, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1999) also considers the ability to develop an idea of what is good and to pursue one's own reflective life plan to be essential. An important aspect of this is a sense of coherence: a basic orientation that ultimately sees life in general and important events in particular as understandable, meaningful and controllable (Delle Fave 2020). The construction of a personal narrative of one's own life plays an important role in this. It can help to shape and ‘smooth out’ one's sense of self, thereby giving meaning to life (Pohl 2007; Bormans 2012,167ff.; Gottschall 2012; Nehls 2014). Through ‘autobiographical memory,’ experiences are selectively remembered and reinterpreted. It serves to develop subjective coherence and continuity, which contributes to constructive life planning (Welzer 2002; Pohl 2007; Monyer/Gessmann 2015; Martela/Steger 2016).

An important empirical indicator that value-based action can contribute to a particular form of SWB is the effect of children on their parents' situation. As already mentioned, children are not a clear source of SWB and often even have negative effects (Köcher/Raffelshüschen 2011; Luhmann et al. 2012; Pollman-Schult 2014; Cetre et al. 2016; Muzick et al. 2016; Wolfinger 2018; Schröder 2021, 26ff.). One book title on this topic is ‘Seven Reasons Not to Have Children’ (Schneider 2003) – and the arguments put forward are often valid (e.g. children as relationship killers, cost factors, career brakes). People without children are no less happy (Watling Neal/Neal 2021). Yet most people believe that children lead to greater life satisfaction. How can these contradictions be explained? Several effects can be identified based on the theory of happiness developed here. The first concerns the aspect of activity: raising children keeps parents constantly busy, especially when they are young. Boredom (a negative factor for well-being) is therefore unlikely to be a problem for them. The parent-child relationship is also a strong emotional (loving) relationship. This is evidenced not least by the

frequently bitter disputes over visiting and custody rights. Thirdly, raising children also makes an important contribution to giving meaning to life. It has a clear connection to the fundamental social value of life (see Haller 2024, 159-185) and is thus an essential contribution to the continued existence of society. A. Hudde and M. Jacob (2025) empirically examined this dimension of the meaning of life for the first time in a comprehensive study on the effects of parenthood. They identify aspects of parenthood that can give meaning to life: the prospects of raising children make it easier to cope with everyday stress in parenting; the awareness that one is providing comprehensive care for one's children strengthens one's sense of meaning in life. This is confirmed by the experiences of parents with disabled children (Liljeberg/Magdanz 2022). A survey of around 2,500 such parents found that they are willing to make great sacrifices and show a high level of commitment, which often comes at the expense of their own interests and creates feelings of overload. Nevertheless, three-quarters of these parents are satisfied with their family life and their life in general. An analysis of survey data from 30 European countries showed that parenthood is only associated with lower SWB in certain groups, such as younger and less educated parents or single parents (Liljeberg/Magdanz 2022). This is more common in societies where less public support is offered to parents or where women are more disadvantaged (Bello et al. 2024).

There are already concrete approaches to the concept of meaning in life in psychological research (e.g. Steger et al. 2006; Steger/Kashdan 2006). However, it is not enough to just capture meaning in life. This term does not directly include the component of SWB, which is central here. It also lacks the component of fundamental social values and ethical and moral norms. Closer to such a concept is the concept of eudaimonic happiness used by psychologist Veronika Huta (Waterman 1993; Steger/Kashdan 2006; Steger et al. 2012; Huta 2010, 2016). Her initial thesis is that there are two basic forms of SWB: hedonistic SWB is primarily focused on maximizing pleasure, while eudaimonic happiness is closely related to meaningfulness. The latter contains four elements: authenticity, meaningfulness, excellence, and growth/development. This very interesting conceptualization, which has already been empirically implemented (Henderson et al. 2011; Baumeister et al. 2013), is incomplete from the perspective of my approach for several reasons: the distinction between only two principles of happiness is insufficient; the assumption that hedonistic happiness is only about physical pleasure is untenable; there is no explicit reference to values and norms. Values already play a central role in Aristotle's definition of eudaimonia, a successful way of life. The findings of these studies are relevant in that values on the scale of meaning in life appear to be stable over time (Steger/Kashdan 2006). Different virtues may be relevant at different stages of life: optimism and determination in youth, care, love and a sense of duty in adulthood, and tolerance and wisdom in old age (according to Erikson 1971,99).

Ethical and moral principles and actions based on them therefore play an important (though not the only) role in the goal of a ‘good life’. Eudaimonia includes the feeling that most things in life happened with good intentions and can therefore be viewed positively, even if one did not achieve everything one strove for and had to experience pain and suffering (Wolf 2020, 205-207). Psychologist Dora G. Gudmundsdottir found that those people who had achieved the highest level of happiness reported that they had experienced difficult times in their lives; but it was not the difficulties themselves that had made them happier, but the way they dealt with them and ultimately coped with them (Bormans 2012, 324). Buddhism also advocates such an attitude. For Buddhism, the first step towards a happy life is to accept the fact that suffering and pain are inseparably linked to life (Reichle 1994, 64-66; Cieslik 2017, 15-16).[4] Evidence for this thesis is also provided by the fact that the main reasons for the desire for assisted suicide are often not pain and suffering, but depression and hopelessness, the feeling of living in an ‘existential vacuum’ (Esfahani Smith 2017, 219); the socio-moral bonds of suicide candidates are weakened (Naroll 1983, 201-221). In contrast, even an

involuntary death can be accepted if it can be associated with a strong sense of meaning. Religious martyrs and politically persecuted people accept a death sentence as a difficult, unavoidable fate and do not fall into despair. The most recent example of this was the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, who wrote in a prison camp a year before his death in 2024: 'But I'm really fine.' (Navalny 2024, 533). From this perspective, humor also plays an important role in maintaining balance and contentment. It is defined as the ability and willingness to react to certain things in a cheerful and relaxed manner, not taking oneself too seriously (Menninger 1974,136; Strotzka 1976; Täuber 2023,86). Humorous people are more satisfied with their lives (Ruch 1998).

Another relevant question here is how people experience the last stage of their lives, how satisfied very old people are. It would be extremely interesting to directly test the hypothesis that many old people are highly satisfied because they continue to find meaning in life. Being active plays a central role here. There are numerous examples of highly productive artists, scientists, etc. who remained and remain active into their nineties.[5] A Spanish study of nineteen centenarians showed that they were characterized by a distinctive set of attitudes and behaviors: a strong will to live, physical and mental activity into old age, enjoyment of social interaction, social engagement and a sense of responsibility (Merino 2023). Several of these characteristics also characterize elderly people between the ages of 80 and 90 (ÖPIA 2022).

What short term is suitable for this form of SWB? One could use the term 'life balance' coined by psychoanalyst Karl Menninger (1974,88). For Antonella Delle Fave et al. (2023), balance and harmony are core elements of mental health. Terms such as life satisfaction or life fulfilment seem to best apply to this fourth dimension of happiness, perhaps also the term life peace. Delle Fave et al. (2023) speak of comfort and inner peace, which involves a balance between personal desires and interests and social responsibilities. The concept of peace of mind therefore means that one has come to terms with life and its vicissitudes, but not merely in the sense of adaptation, but in the sense of reflective assessment and the resulting inner coping. A prerequisite for people to act ethically and morally in this sense and to feel happy is also the existence of social, structural and cultural conditions. There must be generally accepted values and norms as well as a high level of interpersonal trust (Glatz/Eder 2020; Zhao et al. 2024). The fact that this was or is very low in the late communist countries may be one of the reasons for the particularly low level of happiness in these countries. Communism created a double standard (whitewashing public self-image vs. private cynicism), corruption undermined trust in political leadership, and latent anarchy prevailed (Smith 1979; Lewada 1992; for Ukraine, Haller 2024, 41f.).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

First, we will show that the reality-sociological approach provides a very good explanation for the paradoxical research results mentioned at the beginning. The unexpected effects of children and health on SWB have already been discussed above. We will then draw some conclusions for further research and indicate the political implications of the findings.

Paradoxical findings reinterpreted

One finding that is particularly unexpected for economic happiness researchers is the relatively small effect of income on SWB. Four basic assumptions of the reality-sociological approach make this fact

easy to understand (cf. also Lane 2000, 59-76; Schröder 2021, 7-84; see also Conolly/Goerling 2023). Firstly, it is not objective facts themselves that are relevant to SWB, but rather their subjective perception and evaluation. Income satisfaction does indeed have one of the strongest effects on satisfaction. Secondly, income is not only viewed from the perspective of individual benefit, but above all from a social perspective. Household or family income is particularly relevant here. In this case, the diminishing effect of rising income on satisfaction (ceiling effect) is even stronger than in the case of personal income (Schröder 2021, 81ff.). Clearly, the dimension of well-being is at the forefront here. For most people, a moderate income is sufficient to satisfy their most important desires and goals. They are aware that a further increase in income would only be achievable with greater effort (and stress), as Durkheim (1973) already noted. Experiments have shown that giving money away makes people happier than spending it on themselves (Dunn et al. 2008). Children of very wealthy parents often have psychological and social problems (Luthar/Latendresse 2005). Thirdly, relative income is particularly important, i.e. comparing one's income with that of other social groups (Runciman 1966). Most people compare themselves with others in similar professions, neighborhoods, etc., and are satisfied if they are not worse off than them. Fourthly, the correlation may also vary internationally and interculturally; it may be stronger in societies where material success is highly valued (for Russia, see Saris 2001).

A second finding that is not easy to interpret is the U-curve of SWB over the course of life: it is high in youth, declines until around the age of 45 to 55, and then rises again continuously. The vague term ‘midlife crisis’ (Lachman et al. 2015) is of no help here (Freund/Ritter 2009). According to socio-emotional selectivity theory, older people increasingly value emotionally positive goals (Carstensen/Mikels 2006); but why do they do this? It has been noted in the first section that this thesis may be based on a statistical artifact (Bartram 2024). However, we can develop some meaningful hypotheses concerning changes of happiness over age, distinguishing between four types of happiness. For young people, for example, the experience of falling in love (one of the strongest factors for SWB) is certainly more common; they will also set themselves big life goals with even greater intensity and optimism. By middle age, many have realized that some of these goals are unattainable. Bauer and Kaiser (2025) have shown that previous critical life events (such as the birth of a child, divorce, unemployment, etc.) do indeed have a significant negative effect on SWB in middle age. People who have not experienced such events do not experience a dip. With increasing age, two other aspects come to the fore. Aspirations tend to decline, but at the same time, living conditions stabilize; therefore, life can now be viewed more positively in terms of well-being. Thus, SWB increases particularly around the age of 60, which is roughly the age of retirement (Frijters/Beatton 2012). A social, ethical-normative orientation may also come to the fore in older people. In Western societies, they are financially secure and increasingly support their children and grandchildren, and the value of life itself becomes clearer to them. Finally, even in old age, quite a few people still have goals that give their lives additional meaning (Sheldon/Kasser 2001). This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that life satisfaction declines significantly in some people at a very advanced age, especially a few years before death and in cases of serious illness (Gerstorf et al. 2008; Köcher/ Raffelshüschen 2011, 53; Beja 2017). They have probably lost their courage and will to live. In fact, the suicide rate among men rises sharply from the age of 70 onwards (Federal Ministry of Social Affairs 2023).

Another case concerns the surprisingly small gender differences in SWB. Women are reported to be generally more satisfied than men, even though they experience more negative emotions, mental health problems and depression (Becchetti/Conzo 2021; Blanchflower/Bryson 2024; Kaiser et al. 2025). If this is true (it may also be due to erroneous statistical interpretations; see Bartam 2022), we can give several explanations for such a difference. Biological characteristics (e.g. related to menstruation, pregnancy and menopause) and personality traits can play a role here. Women score

higher on the personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness, but also on neuroticism (Weisberg et al. 2011; Köcher/ Raffelshüschen 2011,45; Olares et al. 2023). They are also more socially oriented and less power- and status-seeking (Wood/ Eagly 2012), while men in Western societies commit around four times as many murders (and more suicides) as women. However, we now know that these differences are also caused by socio-cultural factors and that there is no sharp dichotomy between male and female (Poeschl 2021). Here, one can argue that the differences between men and women would be much more apparent if a distinction were made between the four proposed dimensions of subjective quality of life. Women often have different preferences, life goals and behaviors than men; partner relationships, marriage and family are more important to them, while professional success, social influence and status are less important (Hakim 2000; Haller et al. 2000; Booth/van Ours 2008; Wood/Eagly 2012; Parker et al. 2017, Del Giudice 2015). These differences are closely related to the life satisfaction of men and women, which is not necessarily affected by objective inequalities (such as unequal distribution of housework) (Schroeder 2023). The hypothesis is that a four-dimensional measurement of SWB would result in significantly higher values for women in the dimensions of happiness and life fulfilment, and higher (but in negative cases also lower) values for men in the dimension of satisfaction.

Suggestions for happiness research and social policy

The first conclusion concerns the measurement of happiness using a single, standardized question or scale on SWB. However, as argued in this article, this is not a one-dimensional factor. This corresponds to the fact that there is no universal, universally valid set of determinants of SWB (Delhey/ Dragolov 2016; Hyun-soo 2025). It would be necessary to develop specific scales for each of the four dimensions distinguished in Overview 1. It would be expected that there would only be limited correlations between the four dimensions or scales, but that they could be explained more consistently by specific sets of independent variables.

Secondly, it is essential that the explanatory factors include not only the easily operationalizable, objective living conditions of people, as recorded by socio-economic variables. Standardized survey research is fundamentally limited when it comes to recording the intersubjectively specific experiences of happiness and unhappiness (Cieslik 2017). However, here too, one should assume that quantitative and qualitative research are complementary: qualitative research can indeed reveal entirely new facets of a social phenomenon. Its weakness, however, lies in the fact that it sometimes draws hasty conclusions about general correlations from idiosyncratic individual experiences and life stories; it also cannot say anything about the frequency of certain phenomena. However, qualitative research can be used to develop new and more valid standardized measurement instruments, which in turn enable the testing of causal hypotheses.[1] Other methodological approaches are also useful, such as the analysis of conceptual and linguistic associations with happiness (Shin et al. 2018) or open questions about its meaning (Müller 2011).

The third conclusion concerns the necessary expansion of the components of happiness that need to be recorded. So far, it is mainly emotional states and attitudes that have been surveyed, less frequently value orientations, and even less frequently intentions to act and actual behavior. However, it would be important to record these as well. This includes past experiences and encounters. Action should be viewed from a very broad perspective. This includes everyday activities, which are mostly habitual actions, learning and professional work, as well as social, leisure and political activities (Kahneman et al. 2005). Eating together with family and relatives is one factor that helps explain the disproportionately high SWB of Latin Americans (Helliwell et al. 2025). It would also be important to

include indicators of past developments in life circumstances and expectations for the future. Events and experiences that only occur once or twice a year can also be important for the dimension of happiness. A nice holiday is mentioned first when asked about lasting events, as often as a strong feeling of being in love (Müller 2011, 223; Schröder 2021, 122ff.). Happiness research should also cover aspects of suffering and unhappiness, strokes of fate (such as the loss of close relatives) and negative experiences. Happiness does not result from maximizing pleasurable experiences and minimizing negative ones, but from a complex, overall positive assessment of life (Menninger 1974; Delle Fave et al. 2023). An important aspect here would also be the relationship between suicide rates and SWB; at the aggregate level, these do not correlate clearly (Helliwell 2007). Finally, indicators of identity should also be recorded, such as self-perception, self-image and self-esteem, including fundamental ethical and moral concepts. According to the concept developed here, these also represent important elements of SWB.

Fourthly, it is important to be clear about the level at which empirical research is conducted. Findings are often presented and analyzed only at the aggregate level, usually that of nation states (as in Skidelsky/Skidelsky 2013 and in some studies by Inglehart; for criticism, see Haller 2002). It is true that SWB at the individual and global levels often correspond, with people in rich countries being happier on average than those in poor countries. However, this does not mean that there are no conflicts between individuals and society, as Veenhoven (2009a) concludes. Even in rich societies, there is poverty (which is also caused in part by politics), and in welfare states, there are obligations that are not viewed positively by everyone. To capture this, attitude data at the individual level is essential. (Burstein 1998). There are three problems here. First, it must be said that a causal sociological explanation at the country's level is not possible because no direct action is involved. Second, the unit of country or state encompasses units of highly varying sizes (from small states to India and China with over a billion inhabitants). In larger countries, internal heterogeneity can be enormous. Inequality within individual countries is also decisive for quality of life (Sen 1999; Christoph/Noll 2003; Wilkinson/Pikett 2009; Suriyanrattakorn/Chang 2022). Life satisfaction varies with social class and regional affiliation (Rampichini/D'Andrea 1997; Haller/Hadler 2006; Dockery 2010; Okulicz-Kozaryn 2012). A new analysis of trends in 27 European countries shows that global inequality in SWB has not decreased, but in half of the countries it has increased between the rich and the poor (Delhey/Gehrke 2025). Between the individual and the state, there are important intermediate entities such as municipalities (Raphael et al. 1999) and regions, which are often political entities. At these levels, too, greater opportunities for political participation led to higher SWB (Frey 1994). Today, even transnational communities (such as the European Union) are important for people's living conditions and life satisfaction (Milbrath 1982; Christoph/Noll 2003; Haller 2008,43; Gerhards/Lengsfeld 2013). A differentiation according to the four specific types of SWB proposed here would express the significant intercultural differences, which were only hinted at in this essay, much more clearly. All these findings show that it is fundamentally questionable to speak of the health or happiness of entire societies (e.g. Sagan 1992; Diener/Suh 2000; Layard 2005). Only individuals can be happy or unhappy, not societies. The blanket reference to 'cultures' (Bruna 2022) or 'cultural syndromes' (Triandis 2000) is also questionable. This includes the concepts of individualistic and collectivist cultures, which have been used very frequently since Hofstede (1984) (e.g. in Diener/Diener 1995; Kuppens et al. 2008; for criticism, see Uchida et al. 2004; Gerlach/Eriksson 2021). A major problem with country comparisons is that the correlations at the individual level can look very different from those at the macro level (Haller/Hadler 2004, 2006; Fischer/Poortinga 2012; Hadler et al. 2015). Correlations at the latter level cannot be directly extrapolated to those at the former. If one wishes to capture the effects of social structures and institutions on SWB, one must clearly identify those aspects of these structures that are relevant (cf. also Sollis et al. 2024). These

include aspects such as the strength of traditional lifestyles, institutional socio-political conditions such as inclusion and competition in education systems, labor market and employment systems, the strength of the welfare state, opportunities for political participation (Frey/ Zimmer 2023; Glatz/ Eder 2020), and cultural conditions, especially religious traditions.

Differentiating the measurement of SWB using four more specific scales would ultimately also provide better insights and opportunities for new, concrete measures from a political perspective, even if happiness is not seen as the goal of politics. Democratic political systems do not necessarily lead to higher SWB among citizens. There is an interaction process at work here. SWB is only higher when the dominant system of government matches the political orientations of citizens: in authoritarian systems, conservatives are happier, while in democratic systems, liberals are happier (Ponarin/Atanasjeva 2024; see also Flavin 2024). The same applies to the analysis of temporal trends within different countries. International comparisons show that individualization is associated not with a decrease but rather with an increase in SWB (Veenhoven 1999; Welzel 2013). The USA seems to be a special case here. Since the early 1970s, this country has seen a clear negative trend in the general level of SWB despite a significant increase in income (Lane 2000; Yang 2008; Twenge 2019). It would be extremely interesting to examine more closely the extent to which the policies of Republican governments and presidents have contributed to this; under these governments, minorities, disadvantaged groups and other marginalized groups were often subjected to severe shaming (Gilligan 2011). US President Trump has also made and issued numerous statements and orders of this kind.

If there are clear deficits in the dimension of well-being in certain countries or groups, for example, the causes could be identified more precisely and conclusions drawn for health policy, housing policy and urban planning, employment and social policy, and time policy in the broadest sense (Lahat/Sened 2019). Problems in the dimension of satisfaction, achievement and pride could indicate particular social pressure in the world of work and organizations, but also a lack of equal opportunities and openness, or injustices in remuneration and promotion patterns. The dimension of happiness and social embeddedness would enable the need for increased awareness of the new problems faced by young and old people, family formation, loneliness, etc. Finally, findings in the dimension of life satisfaction/life peace would indicate where there are deficits in private networks and insufficient protection by the welfare state. The dissemination of questionable social and political theories in the media is also problematic. It can contribute significantly to undermining social trust and belief in common social values, thereby reducing SWB.

[1] For a very good example in the field of SWB research, see Bernadette Müller (2011), Empirical Identity Research.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Jeremy Bentham, *An introduction in the Principles of Morals and Legislation;* quoted here from https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarismus (15.1.2023).

[2] A number of such critiques were published in the journal Behavioral Public Policy (4/2, 2020); see particularly Singh/Alexandrowna 2020.

[3] Oishi and Westgat (2023) have distinguished a third dimension of happiness (in addition to hedonic and eudaemonic happiness), namely the rich life, consisting of a life full of curiosity, diversity and

complexity. However, this additional type does not appear plausible as an independent dimension of happiness.

[4] This attitude is beautifully expressed in an epitaph for Dr Leopold F. Meißner-Diemer (1835-1895) at the Vienna Central Cemetery: ‘I strove for the best, I achieved the good, Therefore I did not live in vain, Dying was easy for me.’

[5] A recent example was the political scientist and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was still giving lectures at the age of 100, shortly before his death.

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