
How's Life?

By Lothar Katz

I don't mean to be nosy, but please allow me once more to ask you a personal question: how happy are you with your life?

You may not realize it, but your answer not only reflects your individual circumstances, mood of the day, and/or other aspects of your professional and personal life. It likely also tells us something about your culture and country. At least, that's what an interesting study put together by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) says: significant differences in life satisfaction can be observed between people living in different countries, and these differences can be attributed to factual influences only to a limited degree.

The study results, available at www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org, are based on data from a variety of official statistical sources, as well as public opinion polls regularly conducted by Gallup in more than 140 countries around the world. Under an umbrella called 'Better Life Index', the study considers diverse indicators: Housing, Income, Jobs, Community, Education, Environment, Civic Engagement, Health, Life Satisfaction, Safety, and Work-Life Balance.

Surprising Findings

Expectably, differences in standards of living between countries have an impact on how happy people are. It is surprising, though, how little correlation you may find in some cases between the relative comforts of life in a country and how good or bad people there feel about theirs.

Take Israel: threatened in its very existence from the day it was founded, this country scores very low on work-life balance, where almost 20 percent of Israelis report working very long hours, and on safety, owing to high assault and homicide rates. Disposable incomes and several other factors also compare unfavorably with other countries. Yet, average life satisfaction here is among the highest of all studied. A similar apparent dichotomy exists in Mexico: among the lowest scorers in most categories, average life satisfaction in the country nevertheless peg it at #16 out of the 36 countries studied, higher than in such comfortable places as Germany or Italy. Statistically speaking, the correlation between several of the factors in the OECD study is surprisingly low, much lower than common sense might lead us to expect.

To be sure, this study is more than an exercise in statistics. For one, it offers comprehensive public data that seem useful for a variety of research purposes. Moreover, it facilitates a better understanding of what drives people's views on what matters in life and how well they live their lives. Lately, there has been much debate on how to measure the well-being of societies. Are wealth and standards of living all that matters, or should we also be looking at other things, like the balance between work and private time, in our lives? The index provides a more solid foundation for such arguments. At the same time, it raises another tough questions: why is it that on

average, people in some countries are relatively unhappy in spite of what seem to be very favorable living conditions?

Well-being is apparently highly subjective. How else could you explain that self-reported health is higher in the United States than anywhere else, although life expectancy in the country, with an average of 78.7 years, places it at #27 out of 36? Why do the Japanese, who arguably should be enjoying having the world's highest life expectancy of 83 years, see themselves as the sickest of all, scoring dead last in self-reported health?

And what's wrong with those Italians? Scoring around the middle of the list in many categories and much better than that in some, why are people in this country far less satisfied with their lives (#26 out of 36) than those living in much more challenging places, such as Brazil, Chile, Israel, Mexico, or Korea? What about Germany, the envy of much of the world but only #22 on the list, or the United States, found in a modest #12 position in life satisfaction, in spite of being right at or at least close to the top in most other categories?

Comparing Your Life With Those Of Others

Based on these and other indicators, one could argue that to a significant degree, life satisfaction boils down to how people feel about others *within* their culture. Maybe Israelis and Mexicans are happy because they feel that others around them are happy, too? Maybe Germans and Italians are unhappy because they feel that the lives of others around them are 'better,' whatever their definition? It should be no surprise that such notions can cement differences across cultures. After all, culture *is* the collective pattern of values and practices of those who share it.

Don't blame culture for everything, though: whether your glass is half full or half empty is still determined in your own mind—and only there. For my part, I subscribe to what my grandfather used to say: "Happiness is a decision."

Have you made yours yet?

Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor, the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World," and a contributor to "Building Cultural Competence." He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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+1-469-522-3389

lk@leadershipcrossroads.com

www.leadershipcrossroads.com