



Ruut Veenhoven (1942-2024): The Secret of a Happy and Productive Life

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Heaven must be a happy place. After recently adding the eminent happiness scholar Ed Diener to its ranks in 2021, fellow giant in the field, Ruut Veenhoven joined him December 9, 2024. When our own time has come to knock on heaven's door, we imagine Ruut will be waiting for us showing data on happy afterlife years. Diener will likely lecture on the psychological processes that enable us to enjoy heavenly peace.

In this obituary for Ruut Veenhoven, we briefly mention his achievements. We just quote the kind words used in the *The Pope of Happiness; A Festschrift for Ruut Veenhoven*, edited by Alex Michalos. Diener described Ruut as the 'fearless leader' and 'the Number One expert on the science of happiness'. He addressed Ruut directly: 'You are the one who got this field moving, and now the huge interest you have created around the world is apparent to all! You deserve so much gratitude from all of us,

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as well as our deepest respect and admiration for what you have achieved!’ (Diener, 2021, p. 73).

It’s true, Ruut was instrumental in pioneering the formal study of happiness. His early studies of cross-national happiness were go-to citation sources for all of us who were publishing in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. His early research questions, such as explorations of married life, national wealth, and how people make happiness judgments all helped chart the field. Veenhoven continued working until the day before his death, even though he needed strong medication to manage his pain. During the period of 2024–2025, he published 17 new papers, roughly enough to fill four PhD-theses.

In this in memoriam we want to ask your help for the one thing he didn’t accomplish: securing a stable future for his World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2024a), so that it will be updated regularly with new empirical findings on happiness. Veenhoven regarded the World Database of Happiness (WDH) as his life’s work. He and a team of volunteers and coworkers compiled nearly 50,000 standardized descriptions of empirical findings on happiness as subjective appreciation of life. He believed that the WDH was a solution to an ever-growing stream of research findings on happiness, which was increasingly difficult to oversee. ‘As a result, capitalization on earlier research investment is declining, and the accumulation of knowledge is stagnating’ (Veenhoven, 2023, p. 7861) The field needs a place where one can quickly scan the correlates of happiness.

Just to mention one example: when Trump and Harris faced off in the presidential election, vice-presidential candidate J.D. Vance attempted to make it a gender issue by stating that he fears that equity makes women ‘miserable’. Vance said: “Pursuing racial or gender equity is like the value system that gives... life meaning... [but] they all find that that value system leads to misery”. Veenhoven responded within a few hours, with the help of the WDH. He produced a graph that showed a positive relation between gender equality and average happiness in nations. He was also able to demonstrate that men are happier in countries where more women work (Bergsma & Veenhoven, 2024).

The wonder of Veenhoven’s late life productivity, was not that he defied the laws of aging. Instead, he had found a way to reap the benefits of earlier investments. In his PhD study, Veenhoven (1984) focused on the conditions of happiness and continued to update this work, first in books and later on the internet. All this work was not in vain. Volunteers will continue their work on the World Database of Happiness by entering another 1,500 studies. The WDH will be complete for studies published before 2021 and will remain publicly available. The database enables us access to happiness data that otherwise would have been stuck in the paper age.

Veenhoven’s greatest regret was that his work may be frozen in time after his passing. When his doctors told him that he had limited time to live, he requested that an in memoriam be published about him to encourage the community of happiness scholars to build on the WDH. He wrote a paper in April 2024 explaining how this could be done (Veenhoven, 2024b). So, to honor Veenhoven’s last wish, please consider his thoughts on how to build on the World Database of Happiness.

Veenhoven’s preferred option was to continue the project as a whole. This will require an estimated investment of some 3 full-time equivalents (FTEs) per year.

Veenhoven himself managed to carry out the work on a much tighter budget with the help of skilled volunteers. Other options could be to update parts of the database, focusing on happiness in nations, the bibliography, or a specific subject such as happiness studies relevant to public policies (Veenhoven, 2024b). A problem for the future of the database is that it will be difficult to keep up with all the empirical findings, because of the exponential growth in scientific interest in happiness. Perhaps the use of artificial intelligence applications could reduce the number of labor hours needed.

Veenhoven's final contributions to the field of happiness studies also show that continuing the World Database of Happiness is a great opportunity to boost scientific productivity. On December 7, 2024, Google Scholar reports 39,750 citations and an H-index of 79 for Ruut Veenhoven. The field would not have been the same without him.

Veenhoven will also be missed as a person, due to his sunny disposition and his ability to make lemonade, when life gave him lemons. In the final year of his life, he was in the end stages of Kahler's disease, but kept enjoying life. In interviews with popular news media he often said that he felt 'much better than expected given the circumstances'. It was impossible to talk to him for five minutes, without him bursting into laughter. And when he talked about his looming fate, he would console us by staying 'All good things come to an end.'

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