



The Happy Life and Works of Ruut Veenhoven (1942–2024)

Ad Bergsma¹

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Ruut Veenhoven was one of the godfathers of the scientific study of happiness, functioned on the editorial board of social indicators research since 1984 and was the driving force behind the World Database of Happiness.

Veenhoven was born during the Second World War in 1942 in The Hague in the Netherlands. During the sixties, he studied sociology and never stopped stimulating the emancipation of individuals. After formal retirement, he kept working in his room at the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization. On the wall he kept a picture of his younger self, with the long hair and shaggy beard that was common for the counterculture of the sixties. Between 1970 and 1990 he was a leading advocate in promoting the acceptance of voluntary childlessness and abortion law reform in The Netherlands.

In his PhD study Veenhoven (1984) concentrated on the conditions of happiness. His life's work was the World Database of Happiness, in which he and a team of volunteers and coworkers brought together some 50,000 standardized descriptions of empirical findings on happiness as subjective appreciation of life. When his physicians told Veenhoven that he lived in spare time, he asked me to mention in his obituary that institutions could still build on the WDH. If not, his work was not in vain. Volunteers will finish 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 provides empirical ground for Jeremy Bentham's moral theory that societies should aim for the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Veenhoven's underlying idea was that societies can increase happiness when we know in what circumstances it occurs. To paraphrase the American Declaration of Independence, Veenhoven facilitated the informed pursuit of happiness.

Scientifically, Veenhoven will be remembered for several, often quoted contribution. For Social Indicators Research he suggested to use happy life expectancy (HLE) to establish how well people actually flourish in a country. Veenhoven operationalized HLE as the 'number of years the average citizen in a country lives happily at a certain time'. The figure

✉ Ad Bergsma
ad.bergsma@hu.nl

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, Rotterdam 3000 DR, The Netherlands

was obtained by multiplying estimates of length-of-life by the subjective appreciation-of-life on a 0–1 scale.

Veenhoven's most consequential insight is perhaps that countries differ widely in the average happiness of citizens and that it is possible to predict 80% of the variance. People are generally happy in countries in which basic human needs are fulfilled and are characterized by the following:

- technically good governance that makes life predictable and facilitates informed choice of citizens.
- economic growth.
- gender equality.
- security (freedom from crime and corruption),
- individual freedom.
- investment in care (mental health care specifically), and.
- modernity.

As Veenhoven himself recently remarked: 'Prophets of doom associate modernization with increasing misery, but the data show a positive correlation with happiness. We now live longer and happier than ever before in human history and both longevity and happiness are still on the rise.'

One of the highlights of his career was founding the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Co-founder Alex Michalos described the process in *The Pope of Happiness; A Festschrift for Ruut Veenhoven*: 'In 1999, Ruut came to Ed Diener and me with the idea for a new journal for happiness research. Ed thought that serious scholars might avoid a journal devoted to studying happiness because they would think it was a trivial topic. He thought we would do much better with "subjective well-being" in the title rather than "happiness". I thought that because there was a journal called "Pain" and one called "Death", one with "happiness" in the title was overdue. So, we voted and gave birth to the Journal of Happiness Studies.'

Ed Diener described Veenhoven in the same *Festschrift* as the 'fearless leader' and 'the Number One expert on the science of happiness'. Diener wrote to Veenhoven: '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, as well as our deepest respect and admiration for what you have achieved!' Veenhoven functioned as the first editor in chief of JOHS from 2000 to 2005.

Veenhoven did not escape a downside of a long life. He spent his last years in ill health, but has continued working and enjoying life. 'The thought that my death is imminent, gives me peace of mind, much to my own surprise.' One anecdote sums up what he was like. I once phoned in on him when he was stuck on a train platform, because the elevator was out of order and he no longer had the strength to climb the stairs. Veenhoven did not complain, but cheerfully described how much he appreciated public transport in The Netherlands and the excellent health care he received. As one of his PhD students and associate Jan Ott opined: 'Ruut was able to be stoic in the face of setbacks, without sliding into indifference.'

Veenhoven also had an opportunistic streak. When he was diagnosed in 2019 with the disease that would end his life in 2024, he used this news to obtain extra money to finish a paper on the effectiveness of happiness trainings. When I told him that he surprised me, he

simply replied that ‘you have to make hay when the sun shines’. Doing research happened to be his mission and one of his favorite pastimes.

Veenhoven was married to Kiki Dijkstra and was the father of two daughters and a son. The days he could spend with his grandchildren were sacred to him. Veenhoven was a scientist with a vibrant enjoyment of life who never missed an opportunity to poke fun at himself and other dwellers in academia. We will miss him.

Dr. Ad Bergsma is a psychologist and science journalist. Ruut Veenhoven supervised his 2011 PhD dissertation ‘Imperfectly Happy’ and they continued cooperation until today, such as on the effects of happiness training.

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