

## Ruut Veenhoven: Pioneer in Empirical Research on Happiness

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Ruut Veenhoven is professor emeritus of social conditions for human happiness at Erasmus University Rotterdam and is still active at that university in the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization (EHERO). He is also professor at North-West University in South Africa where he is involved in the *Optentia* research program. Veenhoven is founder of the *World Database of Happiness* and of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

### Roots

Ruut Veenhoven was born in 1942 in the Netherlands, which was occupied by Germany at that time. He has no remembrance of the war and not even of the bombing of the quarter of The Hague where he lived in 1945, but has vivid memories of playing in the ruins later on. Both his parents possessed university degrees; his father in history and his

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mother in economics. His father worked as a history teacher and was much involved in politics. His mother was a pioneer in the consumer movement and came to work for the Dutch consumer union. The family shared a vivid interest in social issues and the calling to make the world a bit better.

## Career

Professor Veenhoven completed his secondary education in 1962. Next he served one and a half years in the army and barely escaped involvement in the Netherlands' last colonial war on New Guinea. In 1964 he enrolled for study in sociology at the Netherlands School of Economics in Rotterdam, which later became part of Erasmus University Rotterdam. He secured a position as a student assistant in 1967 and became much involved in teaching.

Since he had planned a career in public service, Professor Veenhoven specialized in public administration. Yet during his study he became ever more interested in scientific work and, following his graduation in 1969, he accepted a position as assistant professor in social psychology at his Alma Mater—Erasmus University Rotterdam. He remained employed at this same university in different positions as associate professor in social psychology until 1988 and, after that, in sociology. In 2000 he became Professor in “Social Conditions for Human Happiness”, which was the first professorate on this subject ever established at a university.

Between 1995 and 2002 Veenhoven was also a Professor of Humanism at Utrecht University in the Netherlands and, in 2011, became extra-ordinary professor at North-West University in South Africa.

## Social Activism

The student protests of the 1960s in the Netherlands went through several phases and Veenhoven was involved in the first of these which was focused on the quality of teaching. He organized the first student evaluation of courses at his university. He stayed apart from the later left wing political radicalization of the student movement, but became involved in the sexual liberation movement of the late 1960s and later in national efforts at abortion law reform.

Professor Veenhoven was among the founders of the first abortion clinic in the Netherlands that opened in 1971. As a young sociologist he orchestrated a campaign to mobilize political support for the then emerging women's movement and brought about the empowerment of women in their own reproductive choices. From 1972–1978 he chaired the Dutch association of abortion clinics, STIMEZO, and was much involved in the political debate on abortion, one outcome of which was the availability of “abortion-on-demand” services in most West European countries.

In 1978 Ruut became an advocate for voluntary childlessness, i.e., for couples to choose to not have children. Though the problem of unwanted children (and related occurrences of neglect and abuse) had been much reduced by improvement in contraception and in the greater availability of abortion, there were still strong social pressures for couples to have children. Associated with these social pressures was a

complex array of myths concerning the supposed unhappiness of couples not having children. These, pressures, and their associated myths resulted in many couples giving birth to children that were not really welcome or wanted by their parents. Together with an action group Veenhoven brought this topic in the media, which has added to the fast growing acceptance of marriage without children.

### **Scientific Interests**

Much of Ruut Veenhoven's early research was inspired by and was his active participation in various forms of social activism. He aimed at contributing to the public debate concerning abortion, voluntary childlessness, and sexuality with scientific facts instead of uninformed opinions. In addition to his own scientific investigations, Veenhoven gathered the then available findings from the research literature world-wide, and encouraged the study of clients of the newly-established abortion clinics in The Netherlands. These efforts helped to change public attitudes, making abortion services acceptable to most of the population.

Veenhoven's study of "happiness" was also politically motivated. During his study in the 1960s, the "limits to growth" movement emerged and gave rise to call for more "well-being" rather than for more "wealth" in society. Different notions of "well-being" were advanced in those days. The political right saw it as adherence to traditional morality, while the left thought of well-being as public goods. The leftist view dominated in the Netherlands and a ministry of well-being (WELZIJN) was established, which added to an unprecedented growth of the non-profit sector. At the same time, Veenhoven had taken a class in social philosophy and had learned about the utilitarian creed that citizens and governments should aim for the "greater happiness for the greatest number" in societies. In this vein, Veenhoven developed a series of empirically testable research questions. For example, he came to wonder whether the "objective" kinds of well-being on the political agenda would result in greater "subjective" enjoyment with life.

In this first research paper on happiness, "student" Veenhoven defined happiness as "...subjective satisfaction with life" and reviewed the available research, a meager twelve studies in all. The paper's thesis was that conditions for happiness could be assessed inductively. However, creditable data in support of this assumption was lacking. This paper was well accepted. It was published in 1969 in a sociological journal and was reprinted in other media outlets.

### **World Database of Happiness**

Since this first student paper, Veenhoven has continued gathering research findings on life satisfaction and happiness from all regions of the world. In 1984, he published the "Databook of Happiness" that provided a systematic overview of 3,600 findings concerning worldwide happiness patterns published between 1911 and 1975. He presented a synthesis of these findings in his seminal book, "Conditions of Happiness" published in the same year. The, then, paper copies of the "Databook of Happiness" was gradually transformed into an electronic database called the *World Database*

of *Happiness* and was made available on the emerging and rapidly expanding internet.

The *World Database of Happiness* is a “findings archive” with respect to studies of happiness in the sense of *subjective enjoyment of life*. To be included, studies must satisfy the highest standards for scientific research. The database contains summaries of scientific findings. Each finding is described on a separate “page” written in English, using a standard terminology for the field. Findings and studies can be searched and sorted according to such variables as subject, place, time and methodology. As of May, 2013 the database contained some 18, 000 findings and continues to attract some 100,000 persons annually.

The aim of this repository of happiness findings is to facilitate high quality research that builds upon previous findings. The organizer’s assumptions underlying the archive remains the same as when it was first established, i.e., that we can identify conditions for happiness inductively and that better knowledge about happiness opens the way for greater happiness for a greater number in the human societies and countries of the world. The database provides information for deciding both public policy issues, such as on the effects on happiness of social security schemes, and for making private choices, such as on the effects of having children on a marriage or partnership.

Veenhoven stands in the tradition of the 18th century “European Enlightenment” which posited that happiness is not only possible in earthly life, but also desirable, and that greater happiness can be achieved with the use of reason.

### **Selected Publications**

Veenhoven, R. (1984). *Conditions of happiness*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Veenhoven, R. (2010). Greater happiness for a greater number: is that possible and desirable? *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 605–629. doi:10.007/s10902-010-9204-z.

Veenhoven, R. (ongoing). *World database of happiness: archive of research findings on subjective enjoyment of life*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Erasmus happiness Economics Research organization. Available at: <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>.