

Testing theories on happiness: a questionnaire

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In the past twenty-five years the issue of happiness has become once again the centre of interest of economists. This renewed attention derives from the emerging of new evidence: in countries with a higher income getting richer does not make people happier. The idea that wealth does not bring happiness indeed was quite common among economists. However, they believed that although a rise in wealth would not produce a rise in affluence, it would not cause a decrease.

The new empirical results have given rise to several questions about what are the determinants of happiness. According to Frey and Stutzer (2002), it is possible to distinguish five determinants: personality factors, socio-demographic factors, economic factors, contextual and situational factors, institutional factors. The presence of these numerous factors allow us to think that there is the possibility for Governments to intervene with specific policies in order to raise people's happiness.

The aim of our paper is first to understand people's concept of happiness. Following the conceptual referent theory of happiness (CRT) of Rojas (2005), we identify several definitions and concepts of happiness. In particular, we focus on the concepts of happiness as fortune, pleasure, virtue, bliss, laetitia, tranquillity, harmony, life satisfaction, realization and human flourishing and the practice of virtue. While in Stoicism, Virtue, Hedonism, Tranquillity, Life Satisfaction and Realization there is a clear philosophical referent, for the other meanings of happiness, such as fortune, harmony, bliss and laetitia, we use operational definitions. We divide the different theories of happiness in two categories: those based on the hypothesis of the existence of happiness producing external entities, and those based on the hypothesis of an endogenous process of internal bliss. According to the first group of theories, happiness is the result of an external stimulus. Material goods and human activities have thus an important role in individual's life. The interior process, on the contrary, implies that happiness stems from feelings that originate and persist endogenously within the minds of human beings. According to these

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theories, happiness can be for example the result of feeling in union with God, or of a serene indifference towards the material world, or a state of harmony with the universe.

There are different implications from these two polar ideas on happiness: in the first case happiness draws on satisfaction of needs, so there is a point in trying to identify basic human urges and facilitate their fulfilment. In the second situation feelings of happiness can be determined by inducing or manipulating the appropriate states of mind, by altering beliefs, or even thanks to medicines, drugs and other external agents.

In order to test people's beliefs and conscious behaviour to achieve happiness, we designed a survey, based on a questionnaire, in which nine questions about ideas of happiness are proposed. Our objective is to apply the questionnaire to a random sample of the Italian population (which represent our statistical universe). In addition to several socio-economic characteristics of the respondent, the questionnaire asks also, on a four point scale, the perceived level of happiness and, on a ten point scale, the level of life satisfaction. The questionnaire includes sections relative to: personal data (age, sex, civil status, education, income, distribution of income, family status, number of children), risk aversion, employment, social capital, relational goods, altruism, perceived inflation and unemployment rate, quality of public services. The data collected are then used to investigate the relationship between perceived happiness, beliefs and behaviour.

The paper has been structured as follow. Section two surveys the meaning of the word happiness over the ages. Section three describes the different definitions and concepts of happiness. Section four provides explanations about the rational, structure of the questionnaire and the hypothesis we want to test. Section five presents the new database and some preliminary results. Section six describes the methodology. Section seven presents the empirical work. Section eighth formulates preliminary conclusions on the hypotheses tested.

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