



## The happy medium

### Description

Over 40 million Facebook [status updates](#) are posted across the world every day. Status updates are simply short messages you post on your Facebook website prompted by a random question such as "What are you doing today?" or "What's going on?" or "How are you feeling?" Your Facebook friends get to read your status updates. Facebook makes available collections of such messages (anonymised) for researchers to analyse, providing a rich database of short texts indicating trends, obsessions and sentiments.

One use of this data is to infer the **mood** of a nation or community. Twitter and other microblogging sites like [the New Scientist](#), researchers have mined twitter feeds to assess mood across whole continents.



How happy are we? Researchers have devised algorithms

that identify the frequency of occurrence of positive and negative words and phrases to derive indices on a happiness scale. The process focusses on very large numbers of short text messages rather than what individuals are feeling.

Perhaps social mood is about aggregation in any case, and averages "defining mood as an average feeling within a group of people. It comes as no surprise that there are sharp spikes in positive mood as

bloggers wish one another Happy New Year and Merry Christmas. "Happy" and "Merry" are words, but their presence indicates a culturally embedded propensity for positive feelings between human beings.

It seems that we human beings are inclined to be positive and happy anyway. According to some researchers, human beings exhibit a bias towards positive emotions. In most cultures, the instinctive response to "How are you?" is "I'm well thanks."

If you imagine a scale between "sad" and "happy" with "happy" at the upper end, then most people will place themselves somewhere above the mid point, ie above the neutral state. There's a lot here about social convention and group solidarity, but psychologist Ed Diener states that most people report feeling slightly happier than the mid point and really do.

## Why are you so happy?

Why do we have this positive bias? Diener proposes that amongst other benefits, this bias actually sharpens our awareness to dangerous and unpleasant circumstances, and improves our chances of survival. It allows negative events to stand out even more strongly. If we incline to a positive mood, then against that background we are more likely to recognize and respond to danger, and the related emotions of fear and anxiety when they occur. So we are inclined to feel good so that we can really feel bad.

Our positive disposition apparently also makes us inclined to explore. Insofar as positive moods enhance our tendency to take risks and approach the unknown, then they help maintain our curiosity: the tendency to broaden our experience.

According to Diener, all of human history is caught up in this positive drive: "Human approach tendencies are manifest in the rapid exploration and settlement of new frontiers and in the unremitting invention of new ideas and institutions throughout human history." This positive inclination expands from a local survival mechanism to embrace the whole of human history.

There's the obvious question of what motivates such study, and how the results might be used. In benign political contexts the results could help in directing state resources to areas where people are unhappy. Or such statistics could be used to confirm the return on expenditure. One such study maps the happiness index derived from Twitter analysis in the various boroughs across London, claiming that the results correlate with well-being maps derived from official census data. Perhaps governments can gather well-being data without asking people to fill in a form at census time.

Such techniques don't capture all there is to know about happiness. With far less reliance on masses of empirical data, Sigmund Freud suggested that we don't only do things for the pleasure they bring. There's deferred pleasure. We are also prone to compulsions that we have trouble describing as pleasures, such as repeating unproductive actions over and over - obsessive hand washing, pacing up and down, shopping, and updating Facebook statuses.

## References

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## Notes

- Satisfaction With Life surveys require respondents to give number scores to such propositions as: In most ways my life is close to my ideal. The conditions of my life are excellent. I am satisfied with my life. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.
- It's disputable whether or not the words people use are accurate indicators of a state of mind, but words do seem to matter. Hence the pop psychology advice: "While dressing or shaving or getting breakfast, say aloud a few such remarks as the following: "I believe this is going to be a wonderful day. I believe I can successfully handle all problems that will arise today. I feel good physically, mentally, emotionally. It is wonderful to be alive" (Peale, p.83).
- An interesting [1999 report](#) has a table of words and their positive or negative valence (ie their association with positive emotions) as rated by human subjects. Words like "justice" get a score of around 8 out of 10, without much variation; "nasty" scores about 3.5 with a fair bit of variation. "Building" rates lower than "car" and "art" and is on a par with "body" but is above "bus". "Architecture" is not there, nor are swear words listed.
- Also see other posts tagged with [mood](#).

## Category

1. Society

## Tags

1. Facebook
2. happiness
3. mood
4. obsession
5. repetition
6. Sigmund Freud
7. Twitter

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