

SCIENTIFIC REVIEWS. OPINIONS

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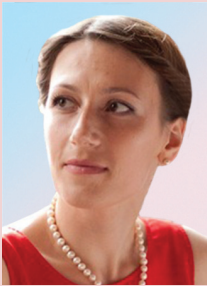
Review of the Monograph:*

Smoleva E.O., Morev M.V.

“Life Satisfaction and the Level of Happiness: a Sociologist’s View”.

Under the scientific editorship of Doctor of Economics A.A. Shabunova.

Vologda: ISEDT RAS, 2016. 164 p.



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Studying the phenomenon of happiness in ancient philosophy made it possible to carry out a revolution associated with a rational theoretical understanding of the underlying subjective aspects of personality. Within the framework of philosophical discourse the main approaches to the understanding of happiness were formulated and several factors that determine its presence were identified, for example, the absence of suffering (Spinoza)

or the pursuit of pleasure (Epicurus). Back in that period the idea of happiness was formed, which represented a motive of human behavior, and it began to be seen as an element of power and a tool of control. Specific features of philosophical discussions of happiness consisted in the fact that they tried to make the broadest and most generalized description of this phenomenon. In the 19th–20th centuries a radical naturalization of

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philosophical concepts begins. The emerging social sciences and the humanities actively transform philosophical categories into specific scientific concepts and study them with the use of the methodological apparatus of psychological, economic, sociological, and linguistic knowledge. At the same time, this shift does not eliminate the need to apply a philosophical analysis; a unique situation arises when philosophical ideas become hypotheses that can be verified by experiment, and the results of sociological or psychological studies can become the basis for new philosophical concepts.

An example of such interaction can be found in the concepts of happiness and quality of life. Modern economic science is increasingly shifting its attention from identifying universal economic regularities in the spirit of A. Smith's classical political economy to subjective drivers of economic behavior. It is possible, albeit with caution, to say that the general trend consisting in the desire to improve the quality of human life has become a challenge not only for the real economy, but also for economics in general. The rhetoric of economic growth is being replaced with the discussion of subjective well-being, satisfaction of diverse needs and overall happiness of an individual.

In this sense, the monograph "Life Satisfaction and the Level of Happiness: a Sociologist's View" is not just a study that is of importance for regional sociology, but a unique source that encourages us to reconsider the philosophical notions of the world, values and needs of the person, role, mentality, education and upbringing in the formation

of attitude toward life and its activities, self-determination, the meaning of life and happiness. The authors of the work under consideration have conducted a large-scale study of the status and drivers of subjective well-being of the Vologda Oblast residents, namely, the happiness index, life satisfaction and importance of terminal values. Currently in Russia there are no similar works, as there are no large-scale detailed studies of subjective well-being at the regional level. Measurements of the level of happiness are conducted in the country as a whole [5], but they do not break down the results of the study by regions and do not provide details about the indicators in different social groups.

In the economic science of the 20th century the problem of subjective factors promoting economic development was considered as well, and attention was paid mainly to the standard of living, that is, to the material criterion. But an increase in the standard of living does not entail a proportional increase in the level of life satisfaction, since these are the criteria of a different order. The standard of living as an economic criterion shows the structure of possession of material goods such as real estate, consumer goods, food, accessibility and quality of services. In contrast, the quality of life includes the satisfaction of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual needs. But even with the ability to meet diverse needs, an individual can still be unhappy. In this sense, the happiness level is an integrated criterion, and the fact that in the monograph pays most of its attention to this very criterion is justified.

To an empirical sociologist the level of happiness as an integral indicator is a kind of challenge in a methodological sense. How can we measure such a value and how can we be sure that we are dealing with a stable phenomenon rather than a momentary mood of the respondent? In this sense, the methodological chapter of the monograph is no less interesting than the results of the polls. The authors have done a thorough job: they applied a comparative critical analysis to a huge number of techniques that help identify subjective well-being, values, self-esteem of the level of personal happiness and life satisfaction. As a result of the analysis, the authors chose the following methodologies to study the level of happiness of the Vologda Oblast residents: the VTsIOM methodology, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), the Subjective Happiness Scale by S.H. Lyubomirsky and H. Lepper in the interpretation of D.A. Leontiev, and the Rokeach Value Survey.

What impression do the results of surveys of residents of the Vologda Oblast residents make? The majority of the oblast population shows a high level of happiness according to all the three methodologies, although the values are somewhat lower than the national average, but the indicator has positive dynamics [3, p. 46 – 47]. However, the authors are cautious when they assess the increase in the share of the happy population; in their opinion, this did not happen because the formerly unhappy people became happier “due to a reduction in the number of people who did not consider themselves either happy or unhappy”. [3, p. 48]. Among the factors contributing to such

changes that encouraged people to decide in favor of a positive side the authors name the accession of Crimea to Russia, the Olympic Games, and a general rise of patriotism; the seasonal factor, i.e. the time of year when the survey was conducted, could also affect the situation. But in the long term the oblast residents feel happy due to other factors, among which the leading position belongs to health (ranks first among the unhappy and second – among the happy people) and a happy family life, which ranks first among the happy and second – among the unhappy people; all of the respondents placed financial well-being on the third position [3, p. 58]. Those who have a family well-being, who have children and grandchildren consider themselves happy [ibid, p. 49]; and the main negative factors influencing the level of happiness are low income, rising prices, disease, and old age [ibid, p. 50].

Young people, respondents who have a family (registered marriage) and good education feel most happy; retirees, the disabled, the unemployed, and agricultural workers feel least happy. For happy people the highest value is realization of their purpose in life, justice and rationality in society, and the opportunity to be useful. The unhappy say that the most important value is work (value-target) and education (value-means).

Financial well-being, the analysis of which is given special attention in the monograph, is seen as a factor which defines subjective well-being in a nonlinear way because of its complex structure. People evaluate their own material well-being and the extent of the

need for material goods largely by comparing themselves with others. In this regard, in some situations, even a low level of material well-being may correlate with a high level of happiness due to the fact that the needs of the respondent are modest; in another situation, the increase in income will lead to the growth of needs, and end up in frustration that would adversely affect the level of happiness. Besides, the adaptation factor is taken into consideration, that is, that people tend to evaluate their financial position through its dynamics. An increase in the incomes that are not very high will be considered positively, and a reduction in high incomes will be viewed negatively regardless of their absolute value. Judging from the text, the authors, noting the dependence of estimates of material well-being on the mentality, values, human environment and other factors, propose at this stage to consider for the residents of the Vologda Oblast and Russia as a whole the changes in material well-being of respondents as the most appropriate indicator, since “the level of life satisfaction is sensitive to fluctuations in the level of income” [3, p. 71]. Indeed, the results of the survey of the Vologda Oblast residents show this dependence. 36% of the poorest group feel less positive in 2012 and 43% in 2015. However, one cannot speak about linear dependence between the level of happiness and the level of material well-being, as it is necessary to consider not only the magnitude, but also the dynamics of incomes, the increase in the needs caused by income growth, and a number of other factors.

An interesting point is that in the group of the most wealthy the average income level of unhappy people was higher than the average level of income of happy people [3, p. 74]; this may indicate natural “saturation” of the share of material factors in the subjective well-being, and adverse changes in the financial situation of wealthy people as a result of economic downturn. This fact, as well as the high level of dependence of subjective well-being on material factors, puts forward issue of general economic welfare in the oblast.

The findings of the survey concerning respondents’ attitude to work are thought-provoking. Regarding the question why the respondents consider themselves happy, the answer “good, interesting work/study, profession” is at the bottom, since it was given by 14% of the population of the Vologda Oblast [3, p. 50]; on the list of significant values work ranks 17th among the happy and 6th among the unhappy people; public recognition in both cases ranks 16th [3, p. 58]. It turns out that either the work is not among the priority values for a person or the Vologda Oblast provides no opportunities for professional realization of the majority of its residents. Maybe this indicator is associated with the peculiarities of mentality, the overall inertia and passivity of the people. This idea is supported by the predominance of conformist values (politeness, self-control) over altruistic (tolerance, sensitivity) and individualistic values (independence, intolerance to disadvantages, courage in defending one’s own opinion) [3, p. 61]. With all the positive

social value of conformism, which, of course, contributes to the stability and sustainability of social systems, we cannot but point out the danger of such sentiments. The reluctance to stand up for one's own opinion and lack of confidence in one's own abilities can lead not only to lower levels of happiness, but also to a lack of desire to develop, set life goals and achieve them, to participate actively in social processes. The "nothing depends on me" strategy is potentially one of the factors that promote the abuse of power. It seems that the formation of viable civil society institutions under such attitudes is difficult, and without it the full-fledged dialogue with the government is hardly possible, even under the condition of openness of the latter.

Despite the fact that the results of the surveys show a positive trend in the level of happiness among the Vologda Oblast residents, it is not clear how it is consistent with the assessments of the socio-economic and socio-political situation in the country and oblast; according to these assessments, the majority of respondents believe that there is more disagreement and disunity in the country – that is how 43% of the happy and 55.6% of the unhappy people described their viewpoint [3, p. 148]; the political situation in general is assessed as stressful, critical and explosive by 66.3% of the happy and 79.2% of the unhappy residents of the oblast [3, p. 149]. Moreover, the answer "it's difficult to live, but it's possible to stand it" is the leading one chosen by 43.1% of the happy and 43.5% of the unhappy people [3, p. 152], and the forecast for the next year, in general, shows the pessimistic mood of the

respondents. Positive forecasts (the year will be good; good, but not in everything) are given by 18.2% of the happy and 5.3% of the unhappy residents, and negative forecasts (the year will be bad; bad, but not in everything) – by 31.5% of the happy and 57.5% of the unhappy participants of the survey [3, p. 152].

Respondents note the ability and willingness to work actively on the family level, at work (to a lesser extent), and as for the ability to influence the state of affairs at the level of their district, city, region and country as a whole, they consider it impossible. But it is the ability to control the situation and to change it is one of the basic factors influencing subjective well-being; that was repeatedly stated in philosophical and psychological studies of the phenomenon of happiness. For instance, M. Argyle indicates that internal control is a personality variable that correlates with satisfaction, and happy people believe that "good things in life happen through the efforts of an individual himself" [1, p. 57]. L.A. Mikeshina draws attention to the fact that the ability to act as a subject, to set goals and achieve them is not just a basic value, but the basis for value orientations on the whole and it is formed only in social interaction [2, p. 104]. Combined with the fact that the majority of respondents indicated that one can only trust close friends and relatives [3, p. 148], we can talk about the narrowing of human life world. Feeling disunity and disagreement in society and their inability to change anything on a global scale, the Vologda Oblast residents shut themselves up inside their family, the processes in which they can influence and

where they feel themselves full-fledged actors. The inability to influence external processes leads to the displacement of many social phenomena from the life world of the person. Mass manifestations of such psychological defense, of course, represent an additional risk factor for the state, because under these conditions the full cooperation between citizens and government is difficult, and social self-organization necessary for the successful existence of society, is virtually absent.

Thus, the study shows that of the highest value for the residents of the Vologda Oblast are their family, children, reliable friends, and interesting work. As for the ability to stand up for their own opinion, to influence the decisions of the authorities, rationalism and high demands of life are at the bottom of the list of important values [3, p. 60]. But here the question inevitably arises. Since antiquity, the main criterion for assessing any axiological system has been its internal logical consistency. That is, if one important value contradicts another, it will inevitably lead to personal and, in a broader case, social conflicts at different levels.

In relation to the findings analyzed we can say that such contradictions are visible. For example, in the list of communication values, happy people place honesty on the second position and unhappy people – on the first position; and the intolerance of shortcomings in oneself and in other – on the 18th and 17th positions, respectively; at that, open-mindedness, that is, the ability to understand someone else's point of view, occupies the 15th and 13th place [3, p. 60]. It turns out

that it is important for us to be honest, but to understand and respect the diversity of others is not necessarily important; and to struggle against shortcomings, including one's own shortcomings is of no importance at all. It means that our honesty, if we allow ourselves to give a value judgment, has a tinge of conformism. As a philosopher, I cannot but be alarmed that among the business values responsibility is placed on the first position in the opinions of happy people and on the third – by unhappy people; and rationalism, the ability to think critically, to make sound decisions – on the 13th and 11th position, respectively. Does it turn out then, that in the view of the respondents, to be happy you need to be responsible and diligent, and you'd better not be smart, independent and tolerant of others? It is obvious that the findings obtained in the course of the research indicate the complex structure of the system of values of the oblast residents, which is differentiated and heterogeneous to a much greater extent, than in the axiological models declared by the authorities [4]. Despite the fact that the task of forming the values is widely discussed at the state level, so far there are no detailed empirical studies that would help determine causal relationships, hierarchy and the degree of real importance of material and spiritual wealth. Especially significant is to identify social, economic, and state risks caused by the contradictions in the system of values and subjective factors in general, which actualizes a more profound sociological study of the structure of values of modern Russian society. In particular, a

high level of conformism identified in the monograph leads to a separation of people, makes it difficult to build partnership relations between people and government, slows down the formation of civil society; thus it can and should be seen as a threat to the well-being of society.

Particularly alarming is the fact that a happy family life, which the happy people rank first and the unhappy – second, is combined with the fact that the active life (completeness and emotional richness of life) is on the 12th place in both groups of respondents; interesting work is ranked 17th by the happy and 6th by the unhappy people; productive life, i.e. the use of their capabilities to the fullest extent, ranks 11th and 9th, respectively [3, p. 58-60]. The question arises: how do the oblast residents see the purpose of upbringing their children and what do they want to teach them if self-fulfillment, interesting work, or creativity (18th position among abstract values) are not among their life priorities? And this is in conditions of radical changes in the economy, education and professional activity caused by the emergence of knowledge societies, the fourth industrial revolution, opening of social boundaries in the age of social networks. It seems that if this value system is preserved, then entrepreneurial activity and innovation activity are more likely to become an exception to the rule, perhaps even be condemned by the inert majority, which is suggested by the pejorative rhetoric with regard to the phenomenon of innovation evident in recent years. This dissonance is somewhat smoothed by the recognition of the importance of education, which is

estimated much higher than the importance of interesting work. This gives hope that the oblast residents still connect the success of their life with self-realization and self-development and understand the importance of intellectual growth and raising the general level of culture.

In addition to the happiness index and assessments of the importance of the values, the study also addressed the issue of life satisfaction. The first two criteria largely reflect the emotional state of the respondents; as for life satisfaction, it captures the rational component of subjective well-being. In order to calculate its value, the general factors have been determined that include family welfare, good financial situation, lifestyle and other characteristics. Overall, 56% of the oblast residents are satisfied with their life [3, p. 77]. The authors draw attention to the fact that this very indicator helps capture “sore spots” in the social climate. The respondents are least satisfied with the situation in the country and financial situation. High assessments of the significance of these factors and a low level of satisfaction can indicate the presence of social tension. However, good relations with friends and family outweigh the low assessments of the financial position and situation in the country; as a result, an integral index shows general life satisfaction.

Summing up, it should be pointed out that shifting to the analysis of subjective factors on closer examination does not reduce the practical orientation of economic knowledge; moreover, understanding the factors of subjective well-being and the detailed

knowledge of citizens' life satisfaction, the structures of the values significant for them, as well as their dynamics can give all levels of government invaluable advantages for the adoption of constructive socially accurate decisions and for the manipulation of the mood of the electorate. At the same time, the results of this study can be seen as a reflection of actual perception of the state leadership and its policies, in many ways more honest and

objective than the election, and also as a no less honest portrait of society, demonstrating our strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, it is not only the scientists and heads of authorities at different levels that should read the book under review and dwell upon its insights, but each person should read it, because it is his subjective well-being that determines the most important aspects of well-being of society and the state as a whole.

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