

SOCIAL CLIMATE

Measuring happiness and freedom

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MANILA, Philippines -- Yes, happiness can be measured. A personal quality having recognizable degrees -- such as "very happy" or "unhappy" -- is certainly measurable.

The desirability of measuring something matters first of all. I admit that my willpower on sticking to a diet is low, and I realize a need to raise it, yet I do not care to see my willpower measured.

The conceptual and practical difficulties of measuring something are secondary. Anything important enough to warrant scientific study needs measurement. Lack of an easy way to measure it is a challenge.

Thus, in the 1989 conference on how to develop a measure of economic freedom, did Professor Milton Friedman stress a tradition of social scientists at the University of Chicago: "If you can't measure it, measure it anyway."

Happiness. The poll group Social Weather Stations (SWS) did 14 national surveys on happiness between 1991 and 2006. The latest round, in November 2006, found 39 percent of adult Filipinos "Very Happy," 45 percent "Fairly Happy," 14 percent "Not Very Happy," and 3 percent "Not At All Happy."

In Tagalog we have used "talagang masaya," "medyo masaya," "hindi masyadong masaya," and "talagang hindi masaya." With this four-point scale, conventional in other countries, it is normal to take the upper two categories as the Happy and the lower two categories as the Unhappy.

Incidentally, the percentages Happy in some countries are: Canada 96, Singapore 95, Indonesia 94, United States 93, Vietnam 91, Korea 88, Philippines 88, Japan 86, and China 78, from the World Values Survey circa 2001. This is neither bad news nor good news. Doing well on any measure compared to other countries is not as important as doing better on the same measure compared to the past.

But the time-trend for Happy Filipinos is flat. The percentage Happy in November 2006 was the same as the 84 in the very first survey in July 1991. It ranged between 76 percent in August 2005 and 92 percent in April 1996. With three scores in the 70's, 10 in the 80's, and one in the 90's, I simply observe that being happy has not been difficult for most Filipinos.

Happiness in November 2006 was 7 points higher among ABC's than E's, and 9 points higher among college graduates than elementary school leavers. It was 6 points higher among rural than urban people; otherwise it did not differ by area. It was about the same for men and women.

But with age, unfortunately, happiness goes downhill all the way -- in November 2006, from 91 percent in ages 18-25, to 77 percent in ages 55+. Earlier surveys found happiness lowest among old widows and widowers. Thus the odds of being happy rise, a little bit, if one: finishes college, lives on a farm, stays youthful, and gets to heaven ahead of one's spouse.

Happiness is personal, not social. Happiness can neither be begrudged to anyone, nor promised to everyone. A government properly targets, not elimination of unhappiness, but eradication of poverty. As a social issue, hurting not only the poor themselves but also society as a whole, poverty deserves more measurement work than unhappiness does.

The "pursuit of happiness" is in the American Declaration of Independence, not in ours. Our Constitution says it aims, among other things, for "a just and humane society [with] the blessings of independence and democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, freedom, love, equality, and peace." These are all concepts whose challenge for measurement can, in time, be met.

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Economic freedom. Last Tuesday, the Philippine edition of the 2007 Annual Report of the Economic Freedom of the World (EFW), published by the Fraser Institute (of Canada), was launched by the Foundation for Economic Freedom together with the Center for Research and Communication and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation Philippines.

The 2007 EFW Report is dedicated to the memory of Milton Friedman, author of "Free to Choose," who inspired the economic freedom project and was involved in it until his death last November. I had the privilege of being his student in Chicago in 1965-70.

Milton Friedman: "For many of us, freedom -- economic, political, civil -- is an end in itself, not a means to other ends -- it is what makes life worthwhile ... [Nonetheless] I believe that free societies have risen and persisted only because economic freedom is so much more productive than other methods of controlling economic activity."

The key ingredients of economic freedom are personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to compete, and the protection of persons and property. In my opinion the measures in the report are quite good for international

comparisons, but should go into more aspects of economic freedom in the Philippines.

On a scale of 0 to 10, the new Philippine value (2005) of the Economic Freedom Index is 6.6, tied for 69th among 141 countries. The top scorer was Hong Kong (8.9) and the bottom scorer, Zimbabwe (2.9). The Philippine index was already 7.1 in 1995 and 2000, but, unfortunately, declined to 6.3-6.6 in succeeding years.

For a copy of the Philippine edition of the 2007 EFW Report, write the Foundation for Economic Freedom through Ellen Cain at ecscain@yahoo.com, or the Friedrich Naumann Foundation at liberal@philippines.fnst.org. All data in the report, as well as data omitted for lack of space, are freely downloadable at www.freetheworld.com.

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