

## Money, sun make Aussies a happy bunch

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A truckload of cash, the right to vote and some damn fine weather - this is what researchers say makes Australians some of the happiest people in the world.

New research, led by Dr Andrew Leigh of the Australian National University, has analysed a mass of "happiness" data obtained over the past six decades.

The paper was prepared as a rebuttal to a 2005 claim by British researchers that Australia represented a happiness paradox.

The argument ran that although Australia ranked highly on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), its citizens were generally unhappy with their lot.

The Poms claiming Aussies were glum?

Dr Leigh and his associate Dr Justin Wolfers thought this argument sounded a bit fishy, and say they have torpedoed the claim with their own research, titled Happiness and the Human Development Index: Australia is not a Paradox.

Drawing on surveys conducted from 1948 to 2005, the research claims the British paper, led by economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, was too narrow to make any accurate findings.

"The British economists had just looked at two surveys, in 2001 to 2002, and found that Australians didn't rank so well on those surveys," Dr Leigh said.

"That didn't really accord with our notion of Australians, who are generally a cheerful bunch.

"We found that when we threw a lot more data at the problem it looked like Australians were doing pretty well on the happiness league table."

While exact figures vary from survey to survey, Australia has consistently ranked near the top of the charts.

In the last survey examined, a 2005 Roper Reports Worldwide study released after the British made their claim, Australia blitzed the field and topped the happiness charts.

The report asked respondents to rank how happy they were with the overall quality of their life from 1 to 4, or from very unhappy to very happy.

Australia finished with an aggregate reading of 3.37, surpassing the third placed USA (3.28) and seventh placed United Kingdom (3.23).

Russia languished last of the 30 countries that took part in the survey (2.63), continuing the trend of former Warsaw countries, such as Bulgaria and Latvia, who were wallowing in a post communist depression.

So do these figures mean that money can buy you happiness? Well, not exactly.

While Dr Leigh suggests countries with a higher ranking on the HDI generally outrank their less developed counterparts, he acknowledges there are always exceptions.

For example, the legendary cheer of the less well-off Latinos seems to be confirmed by the mass of statistics in

Leigh's report, with Mexico, Brazil and Chile consistently performing well.

Anomalies aside, what seems to make a difference for the charts are stable democracies, wealth and weather - and this is where Australia has been coming up trumps.

"What we do know is that people in richer countries tend to be happier, and people in democracies tend to be happier," Dr Leigh said.

He added that seasonal affective disorder, where people get down during winter months, also impacted significantly on the surveys he studied.

"For example, if you're interviewed in winter you are less likely to be happy than if your interviewed in summer," he said.

"So, given that Australia has a mild winter, you might well think that our better weather helps us get through life a little easier."

So where to from here?

The next step, Dr Leigh says, is determining exactly what it is that makes people happy.

This is where the emerging field of neuro-economics comes into the equation, where participants volunteer to be hooked up to an magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine and have their brain waves examined.

Images, sounds and questions are posed to the volunteers, with their brain waves mapped to determine what it is that pushes their buttons.


Enter the market researchers.

Ford, General Motors and the British lottery company Camelot are said to already be using the technology to fine-tune their sales pitches.

This follows the reasoning that emotions, and not reason, determine what we spend our money on, with happiness identified as the most important emotion in the decision-making process.

So next time a market researcher interrupts your dinner with an intrusive phone call, spare a thought for the poor souls wired up to MRI machines, busily watching flashing pictures of consumer goods.

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