

What percentage of people in Europe are flourishing and what characterises them?

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The importance of subjective indicators of well-being

It is now widely accepted that the way people experience their lives is inherently valuable information in itself, and an important determinant of policy-relevant behaviour. It may even be a more important determinant than the objective facts of their lives such as their income, housing, and the availability of resources (e.g. Layard, 2005). Some people have a sense of well-being even when their objective circumstances are harsh, while others feel their lives are empty or stagnant despite very favourable circumstances. There is a need to measure how citizens experience their lives in order to supplement objective measures such as GDP, health, social and environmental indicators (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

The concept of flourishing

A person can be said to be flourishing if they perceive that their life is going well. Flourishing is a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. It is based on self-report and is therefore a subjective measure of well-being. Flourishing is one of a range of ways of conceptualising well-being, by focusing on the top end of the spectrum. It is equally important to consider population means and distribution of well-being.

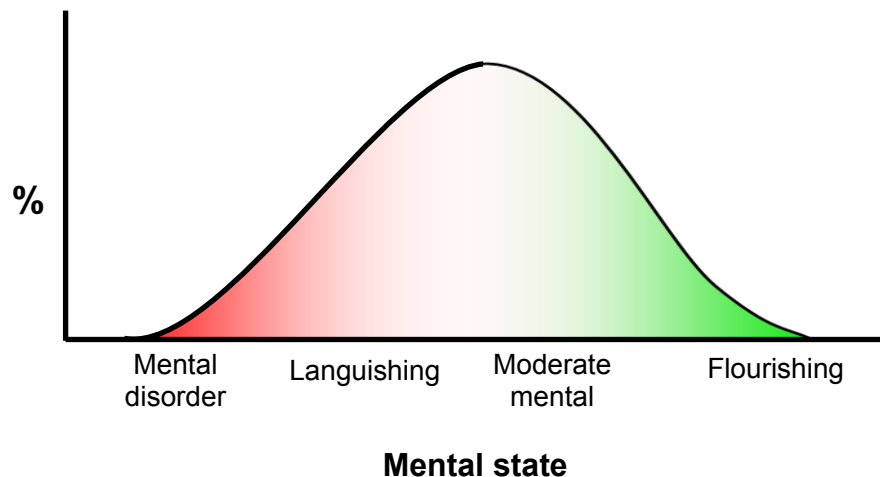
One reason for focussing on the upper end of the distribution is that individuals who are flourishing (or who have a high level of psychological well-being), learn effectively, work productively, have better social relationships, are more likely to contribute to their community, and have better health and life expectancy (Diener et al., 2009; Huppert, 2009). High levels of flourishing are also associated with economic benefits due to less absenteeism and under-performance in schools and work places, lower healthcare costs and less need for expenditure on the effects of social disintegration.

The mental health spectrum

The mental health of the population can be represented as a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are the common mental disorders such as anxiety or depression. If they are severe enough and meet strict clinical criteria, a person may be diagnosed as having a

common mental disorder. Individuals who do not meet the criteria may nevertheless be experiencing difficulty and unhappiness in their daily lives. They can be described as languishing (Keyes, 2002). Most of the population has moderate mental health, while a percentage can be described as flourishing. At any one time, the mental health of each individual falls at one point along this spectrum. Individuals can move up or down the spectrum at different times in their lives. We use the term general flourishing to refer to a person who is usually near the high end of the spectrum.

The mental health spectrum



In order to estimate the number of people who are flourishing and to understand the factors associated with general flourishing, we need to define it. There are many **conceptual definitions** of flourishing or related concepts such as psychological well-being or positive mental health (e.g. Jahoda, 1958; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) but advances in our knowledge require an **operational definition** of flourishing.

Developing an operational definition of flourishing

Since flourishing can be regarded as the opposite end of the mental health spectrum to common mental disorders, we began with DSM and ICD operational definitions of depression and anxiety, and identified their opposites. Surprisingly, these definitions did not cover two concepts which we felt were important to include in an operational definition of flourishing – sense of control and relationships with others. Somatic features such as appetite and sleep were not included in this process. We also decided to adopt the DSM/ICD format:

- a set of core features
- a minimum number of additional features

This resulted in identifying the following as the features of flourishing:

Core features	Additional features
Positive emotions Engagement, interest Meaning, purpose	Self-esteem Optimism Resilience Vitality Self-determination Positive relationships

European Social Survey

The dataset to which we chose to apply our provisional operational definition is the European Social Survey (ESS). The latest round of the ESS incorporates a Well-being Module (Huppert et al., 2009) which has been administered in 23 countries, with a total sample of around 43,000 adults (aged 16+). For each feature we selected one item which most closely corresponded to the relevant feature.

ESS items corresponded to seven of the nine features of general flourishing:

Positive emotion	Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
Engagement, interest	I love learning new things.
Meaning, purpose	I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile.
Self-esteem	In general, I feel very positive about myself.
Optimism	I'm always optimistic about my future.
Resilience	When things go wrong in my life it generally takes me a long time to get back to normal. (reverse coding)
Positive relationships	There are people in my life who really care about me.

We used data from the UK to decide on how to combine these items into a provisional operational definition. For each item, we identified all respondents in the UK who strongly endorse that feature. If the number who strongly endorse the feature was less than 25% of the sample, we included respondents who moderately endorse it as well as those who strongly endorse it (e.g. 'agree' plus 'strongly agree'). The table below shows the percentage of the UK sample who had different combinations of features:

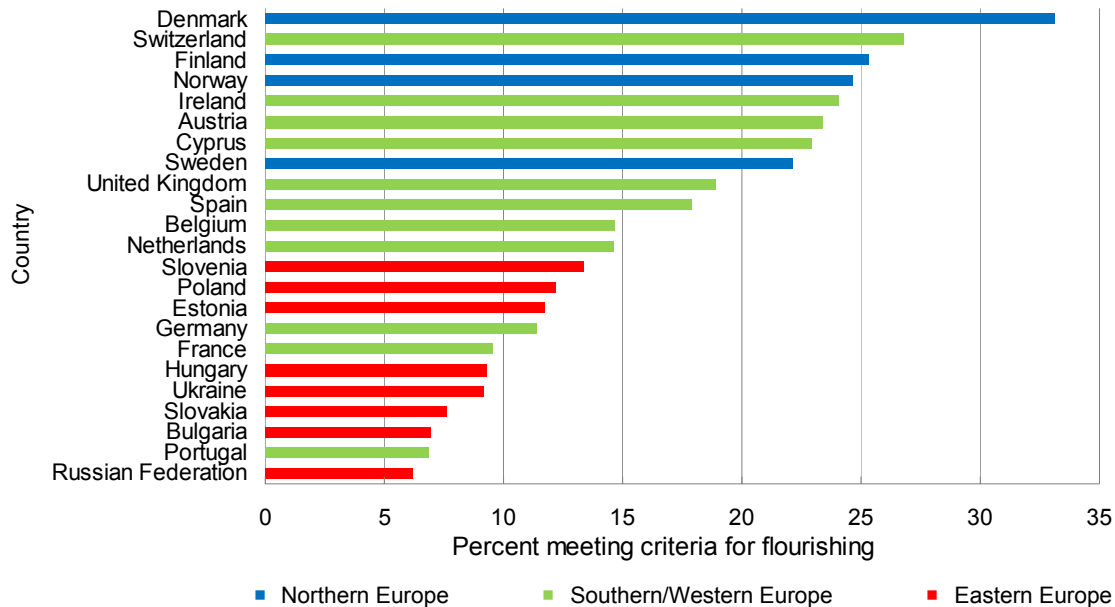
Combination of features	%
Core features only	23.7
Core + 1 other	23.5
Core + 2 others	22.3
Core + 3 others	18.9
All features	10.7

Since the first three percentages were all very similar, we chose core plus three additional features as our criterion. Thus, to be classified as flourishing, an individual has to meet the criterion for all 3 core features and any 3 additional features. We applied this operational definition to data from the 23 countries participating in the ESS.

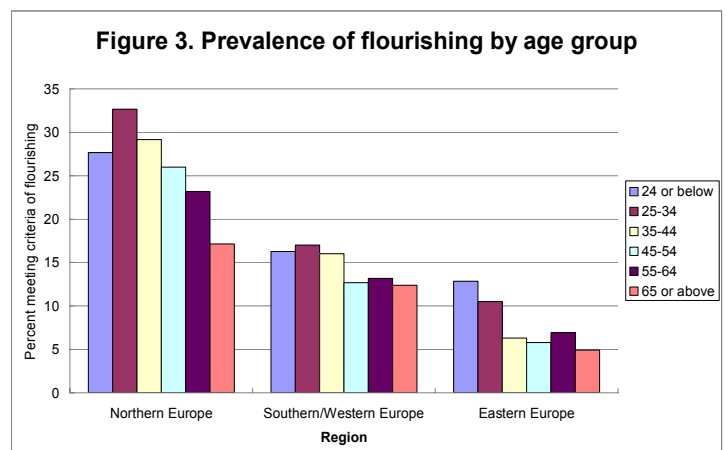
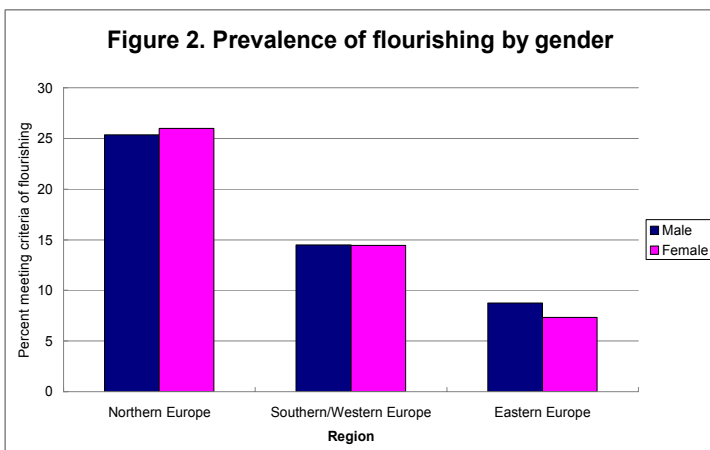
Survey results

Figure 1 shows a very wide variation in the prevalence of flourishing across Europe. The highest rates are in Northern Europe and the lowest rates in Eastern Europe.

Figure 1. Prevalence of flourishing across European countries participating in the European Social Survey 2006/7



Figures 2-6 show that in all regions, gender differences are small, higher flourishing is associated with higher education and income, and married people are more likely to be flourishing than those no longer married. While flourishing generally declines with age, the gradient is fairly flat in South/West Europe. Indeed, in some individual countries in this region, people aged 65+ show the highest rates of flourishing (Ireland; UK men), and middle-aged people show the lowest rates.



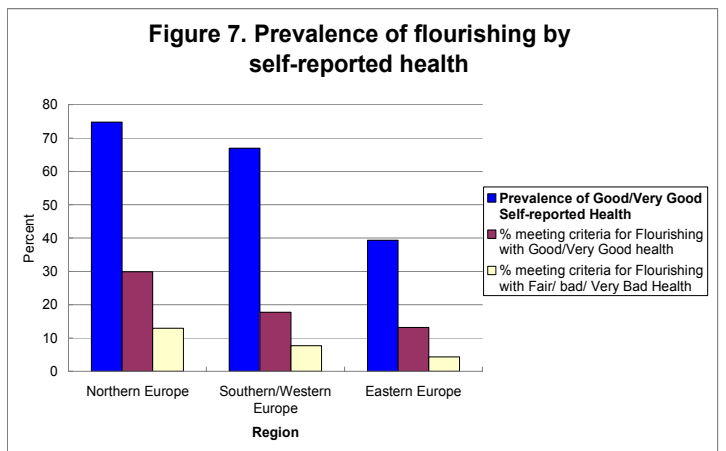
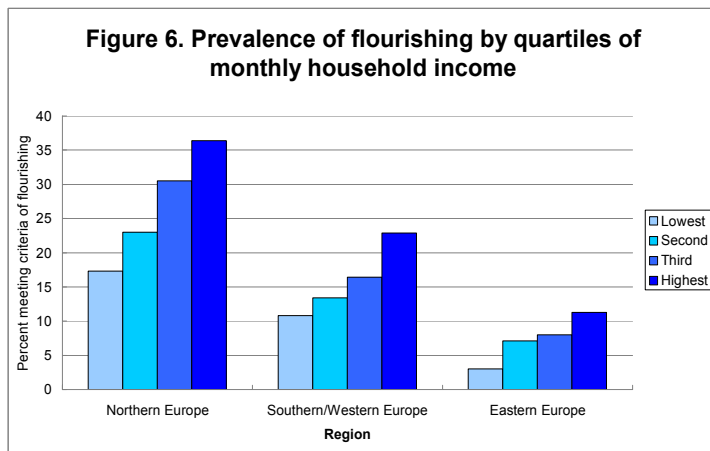
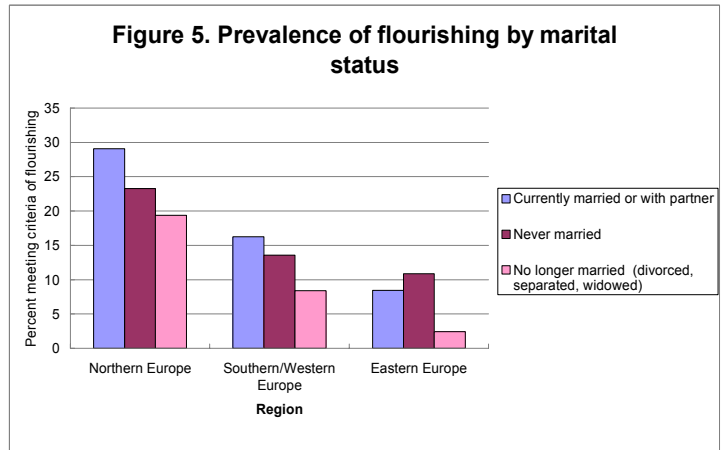
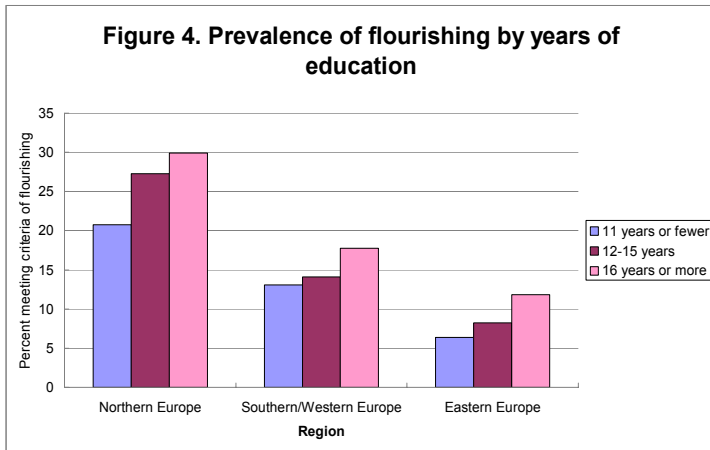


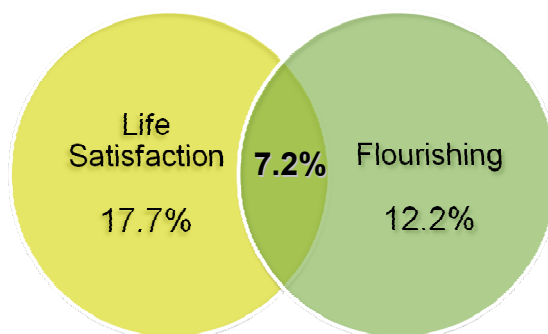
Figure 7 shows the association between flourishing and self-reported general health. The overall correlation is 0.17. For all regions, the prevalence of flourishing is substantially higher in people with good self-reported health, although only around one third of people with good self-reported health are flourishing.

Low levels of flourishing in Eastern Europe are related in part to lower levels of education, income and self-reported health. However, regression analysis shows that large regional differences persist when health and sociodemographic variables have been controlled for. Cultural factors, recent declines in social welfare provision, and increases in income inequalities probably influence the lower rates of flourishing in Eastern Europe.

The relationship between life satisfaction and flourishing

Life satisfaction is frequently used as a measure of subjective well-being, and is often measured using a single item. If a single item about life satisfaction is a good indicator of flourishing, then surveys could ask one question rather than several. We therefore compared our flourishing measure with a measure of life satisfaction.

High life satisfaction was defined as a score of 9 or 10 (on a scale of 0 to 10) on “How satisfied are you with how your life has turned out so far?”. The diagram below shows the relationship between flourishing and life satisfaction in the total European sample.



The correlation between flourishing and life satisfaction in the ESS data is 0.32. For the population as a whole, 12.2% met criteria for flourishing and 17.7% had high life satisfaction. The percentage who had high life satisfaction and were flourishing was 7.2%. One third of flourishing people did not obtain a high score on life satisfaction and half of those with high life satisfaction did not meet criteria for flourishing. Therefore these are clearly different concepts, so a single item about life satisfaction is not an adequate substitute for a measure of flourishing. Furthermore, a measure of life satisfaction would lack the greater texture of a flourishing measure, the elements of which can also be examined separately in relation to temporal or social changes.

Conclusions and future directions

This preliminary work on developing an operational definition of flourishing and applying it to data across Europe has proved fruitful and informative. The following represents a series of steps which we propose should be taken next.

- Seeking an international consensus on an operational definition of flourishing
- Applying this definition to existing data sets from representative national and international population samples
- Advancing our understanding of the correlates, causes and consequences of flourishing
- Creating or refining measures of flourishing to be used in future surveys which should be carried out at regular intervals to allow population changes to be tracked
- Using the new measures to examine the impact of social change or policy interventions.

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