# Pursuing happiness: ideas of Hungarian students about life goals and determinants of happiness

*Judit Kőrössy,[1] Márta Csabai[2] and Mark Kékesi [1]*
*[1]University of Szeged (Hungary), [2] Hungarian Academy of Science (Hungary)*

### *Abstract*

*The study focuses on the beliefs of happiness, and values in connection with happiness among university and secondary grammar school students. Happiness is not only an important factor of adolescents' academic achievement, inter- and intrapersonal functioning in school, but also a predictor of institutional trust, or trust in government (Brehm, Rahn, 1997). Consequently, happiness or satisfaction with life is a significant component of citizenship, and the citizen/civil participation in the life of local community. The aim of our pilot study was partly to describe the determinants of happiness according to young people, and preferred values, and partly to study students' goals, plans and personal resources concerning their future life and work career, or mobility.*

*Happiness is not only a personal mental and emotional state, but a cultural and social representation. Happiness is a special mental construction integrating several beliefs and values, e.g. determinants of happiness, internal and external resources to attain happiness, values connected to happiness, required strategies or steps leading to happiness.*

*487 students (14-26 year-old students, living in one of the biggest Hungarian towns; mean age: 18,3; 52% females, 48% males;) answered the 22 questions of our questionnaire (choosing among 4 values of hypothetical situations; rating determinants of happiness on Likert-scale; rating happiness of self and the Hungarians on Likert-scale; ranking happiness related values chosen from Rokeach's terminal values; ranking competencies for working in an another country).*

*According to results, almost 75% of sample would like to live in a country, which is perceived as providing happiness and material well-being. However, they accentuate social relationships in contrary to material goods as determination of happiness. Most students emphasized creativity, inventiveness and knowledge, and competence as necessary skills in connection with working and living in another country. Self-actualization and employment abroad were the preferred values in the four hypothetical life periods.*

Migration and the related issue of citizenship are an important topic in Europe today, both in politics and in everyday life. Migration is a controversial issue. First, there is a widespread belief that migration is an undesirable phenomenon which is continuously increasing in Europe, and that it is synonymous with terrorism and crime (Lister, Pia, 2008). Second, it is clear that migration is related to demographic issues: for example, a

decrease in the working-age population (Lister, Pia, 2008). Therefore migration has a positive role to play in the consideration of social problems.

The focus of our study is labour migration as a kind of life goal. Hungarian public opinion has been strongly focused on employment abroad recently. We investigated how typical it is of Hungarian students to stay and work abroad for a short or long period. We also examined the values relating to this life goal, and the connection between happiness and the intentions of students because life goals are strongly connected with happiness. Happiness, however, is considered to influence many factors of citizenship. A study by Brehm and Rahn (1997) verified that happiness is a predictor of institutional trust.

Migration is used in this paper to mean going and working abroad for short or long periods.

**Happiness and the relationship between happiness and goals**

Adopting the concept of cultural representation (Uchida, Norasakkunkit, Kitayama, 2004) the lay theory of happiness is considered as a social representation. According to this approach happiness is a social phenomenon, which is constructed by different social groups and strata during continuous social communication. Moscovici (1973), the founder of the theory of social representations, defines the term as follows: a value (system), idea, or practice that allows people to discover and manage the world, and to communicate with others.
We regard happiness as a value with which many different views are connected. Some related ideas are:
- The determinants of happiness (the factors which make us feel happy)
- The inner resources of success or thriving (cognitive and emotional skills, personality factors)
- The values related to happiness
- The best strategy to attain happiness
- The important life goals
- Characteristics of a happy person
- The relationship between individual happiness and success or development of the community.

The social representation of happiness has multiple functions:
- It provides meaningful knowledge about happiness, its social circumstances and conditions
- It defines different possibilities of attaining happiness
- It orients people toward certain preferences
- It makes it possible to communicate with others.

The content of happiness and the other related views change or can change continuously during social discourse in small groups. Happiness as a value is related to near and distant future plans and goals. Happiness, or *eudaimonia* (Greek: εὐδαιμονία; the chief human good, the aim of realising human life in all its fullness) entails intrinsic goals which are manifested in personal growth, intimacy and affiliation, contribution to community, and physical health (Ryan, Huta, Deci, 2008). Although intrinsic and

extrinsic goals are well-defined in psychology, some empirical evidence draws attention to the unusual meaning of goals constructed by different cultures. For example, the financial success which considered extrinsic goal in the U.S. showed positive correlation with psychological well-being in Romania, because financial success was closely related to self-direction (Frost, Frost, 2000).

We focused on the following themes in our pilot study:

- Level of happiness in Hungary and abroad
- Migration plans: purpose, time, destination and values
- Values as life goals
- Determinants of happiness.

**Method**

*Participants*

The questionnaire was completed by 487 students, of whom the youngest was fourteen years old, the oldest 26. The average age of the sample was 18.3 years. The respondents were secondary school and university students in one of the biggest towns in Hungary. Distribution was almost equal in different types of educational institutions: in grammar school, in specialised secondary school, and in university. The sex ratio of the sample was also balanced: 52% women, 48% men. There were significant differences in sex ratio according to educational institutions: men were overrepresented in the specialised secondary school, and women in grammar school (Table 1).

**Table 1. Distribution of the sample**

|  |  |  | Type of educational institution | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | Grammar school | Specialised secondary school | University |  |
| **Gender of respondents** | **Male** | N | 66 | 101 | 66 | 233 |
|  |  | % | **13.6** | **20.7** | **13.6** | **47.8** |
|  | **Female** | N | 101 | 53 | 100 | 254 |
|  |  | % | **20.7** | **10.9** | **20.5** | **52.2** |
| **Total** |  | N | 167 | 154 | 166 | 487 |
|  |  | % | **34.3** | **31.6** | **34.1** | **100** |

*Measures*

The 22 questions of our questionnaire were chosen after 16-20-year-old students had been interviewed.

The main themes of the questionnaire are:

*(A) Level of happiness in Hungary and abroad*
1. Rating happiness of the Hungarians on a 10-point Likert scale
2. Rating students' own happiness in general and recently on 5-point Likert scale
3. The happy countries: choosing and ranking three countries where people are really happy (without preliminary list of countries).

*(B) Living abroad: purpose, time, destination, and values*
1. Intention to stay abroad for longer period
2. Selection of time period abroad from seven possibilities.
3. Ranking three destinations of living abroad (without preliminary list of countries)
4. Ranking the five given values concerning living abroad.

*(C) Values as life goals: the values in four life situations*
Respondents had to choose specific values in four life situations containing dilemmas. The task of students was to advise the actors which options to choose in their particular situation. The four actors represented different phases of life: a 19-year-old female student; a 30-year-old male engineer; a 49-year-old woman sales manager; a 64-year-old male pensioner. The four alternatives proposed included four values: happy family, love relationship (H), financial security, stability (F), migration, going abroad (M), self-realisation, autonomy (S).

*(D) Determinants of happiness*
Respondents had to rate the ten factors of happiness on a 5-point Likert scale on the basis of their likely contribution to happiness. The ten factors are: childhood experiences, education, family and relatives, financial security, friendships, luck and chance, nature of work, personality, richness and wealth, social networks.

*(E) Socio-demographic background of the students and experiences abroad*
Data about respondents' age, school type, parental education, and experience of foreign travel or residence were requested.

**Results**

*(A) Level of happiness in Hungary and abroad*

*1. Happiness in Hungary*

We asked students to estimate the general level of happiness in Hungary on a 10-point Likert scale.
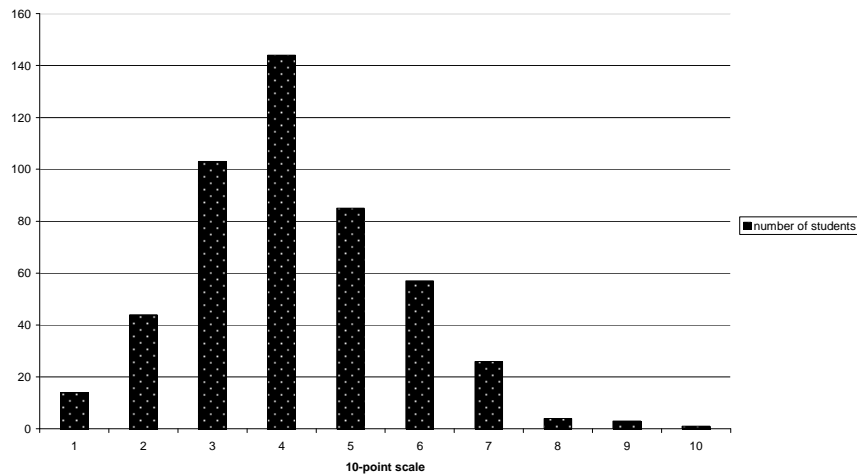
**Figure 1. Distribution of perceived Hungarian happiness**
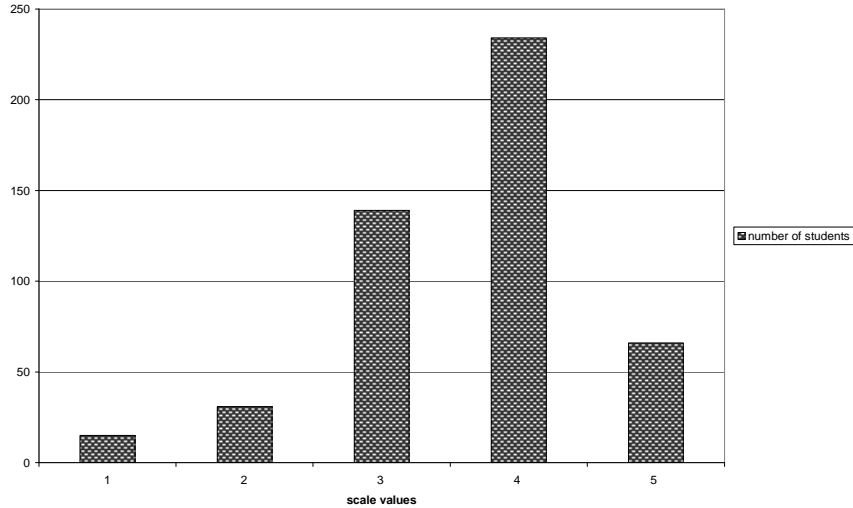**Meaning of scale values: 1= not happy at all; 10= very happy**

The distribution of responses does not follow the normal distribution (Figure 1). Many more students gave extremely low scores than extremely high ones. The mean value was 4.17, with a standard deviation of 1.52. The majority of the students perceived Hungarians to be less happy, which does not convey an optimistic view.

The significant differences of analysis of variance verified that those respondents who had never been abroad and those who had spent more than twelve months abroad see Hungarians as least happy (means 3.8, 2.8 respectively, F=2.842, p=0.024). Therefore we can conclude that both experience of living abroad for a longer period and the lack of such experience influence the perception of Hungarian happiness in a negative way.

The students consider Hungarian people slightly unhappy, which reflects more negative judgement than for other assessment of happiness. For example, Hungary scores 5.5 in the middle of the scale, and so is ranked between 84 and 88 out of 144 nations between 2000 and 2008 (Veenhoven, 2009). Other Hungarian life-satisfaction measurements also show that the average values are in the middle of the scale, or slightly above. For example the mean score of happiness on the 4 point scale was 2.36 (SD 0.83) in 2008, when the question was "How satisfied are you with the life you lead?" (Veenhoven, 2008b).

*2. Personal happiness*

Students were asked to rate their own happiness in general and recently on a 5-point Likert scale. The following two histograms show the distribution of values concerning personal happiness in general (Figure 2) and recently (Figure 3).

**Figure 2. Distribution of one's own happiness in general**
**Meaning of scale values: 1= not happy at all; 5= very happy**
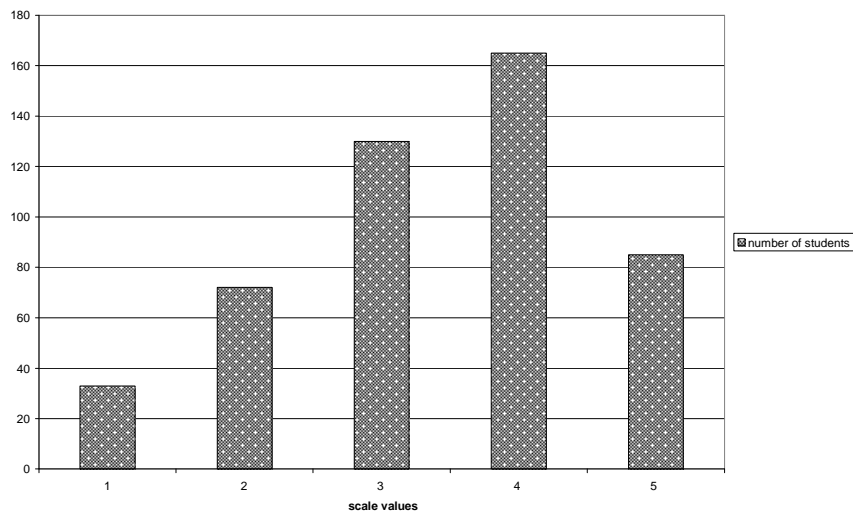


**Figure 3. Distribution of one's own happiness recently**
**Meaning of scale values: 1= not happy at all; 5= very happy**

The comparison of the two histograms shows that young people perceive themselves happier in general ($\mu = 3.63$) than recently ($\mu = 3.39$), as proved by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Z=-4.654, p = 0.000).

There is a positive but moderate correlation between the two scales of personal happiness (Spearman's Rho = 0.467, p = 0.000). It means that students who consider themselves happy in general perceive themselves happy recently, too. The correlation

between personal happiness in general and age was positive but rather weak (Spearman's Rho=0.131, p=0.004).

No significant differences were found between the two personal happiness values from the aspect of gender, school type, family background, value preferences, and experiences of and plans for living abroad. Personal happiness is probably a more complex phenomenon, and cannot be predicted by socio-demographic variables or value preferences.

Only a weak positive correlation is observed between personal happiness 'in general' and perceived Hungarian happiness (Spearman's Rho=0.238, p=0.000). We found similar weak correlation between personal happiness 'recently' and perceived Hungarian happiness (Spearman's Rho= 0.185, p=0.000). Therefore, the students who saw Hungarians as happier also perceive themselves as happier.

*3. The happy countries*

We asked students to name and rank three countries, without a preliminary list, where inhabitants feel themselves to be happy. The ten happiest countries mentioned first are represented by striped columns, and the sum of all three mentioned is shown by dotted bars.

The respondents put the following countries in the first place on the list: the United States, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (Figure 4).
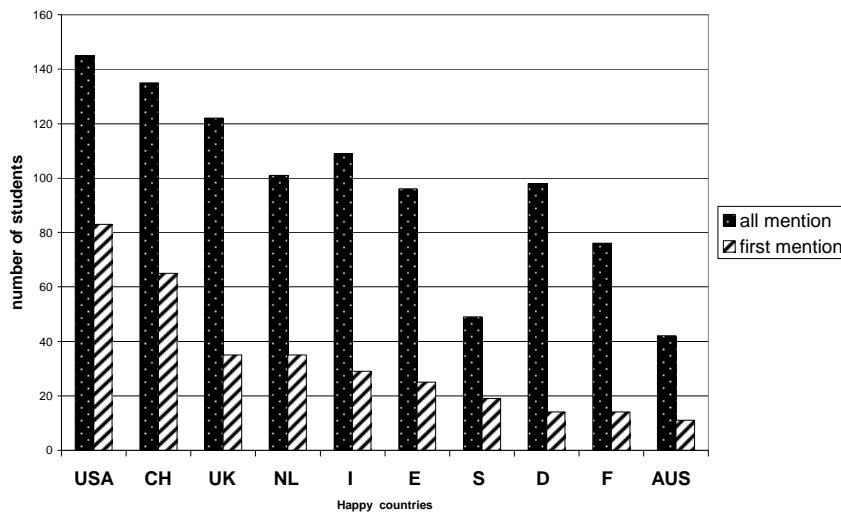


**Figure 4. The rankings of happiest countries**

According to other measurements of life-satisfaction, people in these countries are really happy, but two of them (the US and the UK) are not the happiest countries in the world. On a scale from zero to ten the US scored 7.0, Switzerland 8.1 and the United Kingdom

7.1. The four happiest countries are Iceland (8.5), Denmark (8.4), Colombia and Switzerland (8.1) in the world ranking (Veenhoven, 2009)

**(B) Duration and place of residence abroad**

*1. Living abroad for a longer period as a goal*

We asked students about their intention of going abroad. The three possible answers were: yes, no, no idea.

**Table 2. Distribution of sample according to intention of going abroad**

|          | Frequency | Percent |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| Yes      | 347       | 71      |
| No       | 69        | 14      |
| No Idea  | 70        | 15      |
| Total    | 486       | 100     |

The vast majority of the respondents, that is 71%, answered that they were thinking about going abroad for a longer period (Table 2). Significantly more women than men want to go abroad (contingency coefficient=0.113, p=0.042). Grammar school students most often mentioned it as a life goal (contingency coefficient=0.153, p= 0.021).

*2. Period of time abroad*

Young people had to select a preset period of living abroad from seven possibilities.

**Table 3. Distribution of sample according to the planned period of staying abroad**

|                | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|
| No and no idea | 129       | 27      |
| 1-3 months     | 42        | 7       |
| 3-6 months     | 30        | 6       |
| 6-12 months    | 43        | 9       |
| 1-3 years      | 72        | 15      |
| 3-5 years      | 37        | 8       |
| Even forever   | 133       | 27      |
| Total          | 486       | 100     |

Twenty-seven per cent of the sample chose the possibility that they would leave Hungary even forever. The second largest group (15%) would spend one to three years abroad.

The male respondents are overrepresented in the 'even forever' answer category, female students preferring shorter periods (contingency coefficient=0.165, p=0.034).

*3. The preferred destination abroad*

We used open questions to ask students about their preferred destination abroad. Respondents had to name and rank three countries.

The ten most popular countries mentioned in first place are represented by striped columns, and the sum of all three mentioned is shown by dotted bars (Figure 5).
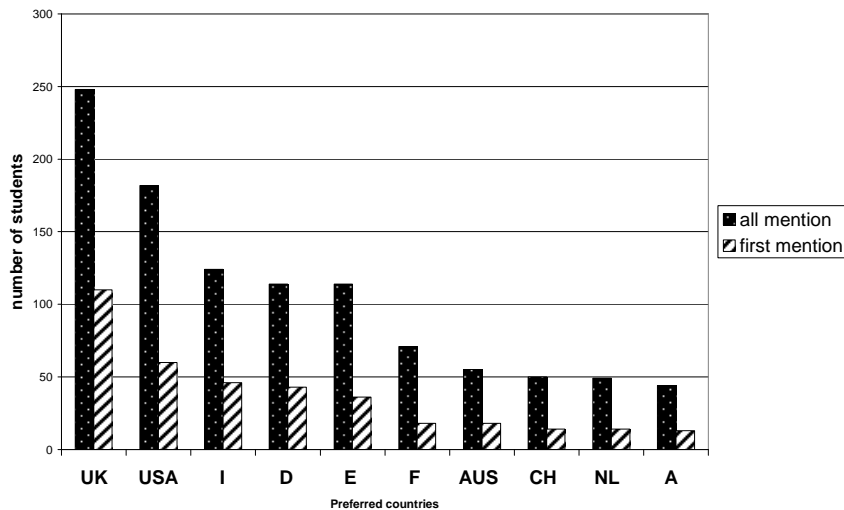


**Figure 5. The preferred countries for living or staying**

The most attractive ten countries show striking similarity to happy countries. Students would like to travel to those countries where people are assumed to live happy. Switzerland lost its second place, and slipped back to eighth place, and Sweden is missing from this ranking.

*4. The values provided by living abroad*

We asked students to rank five values provided by the first selected foreign country. The following five values were mentioned: peace, security, material welfare, happiness, freedom.
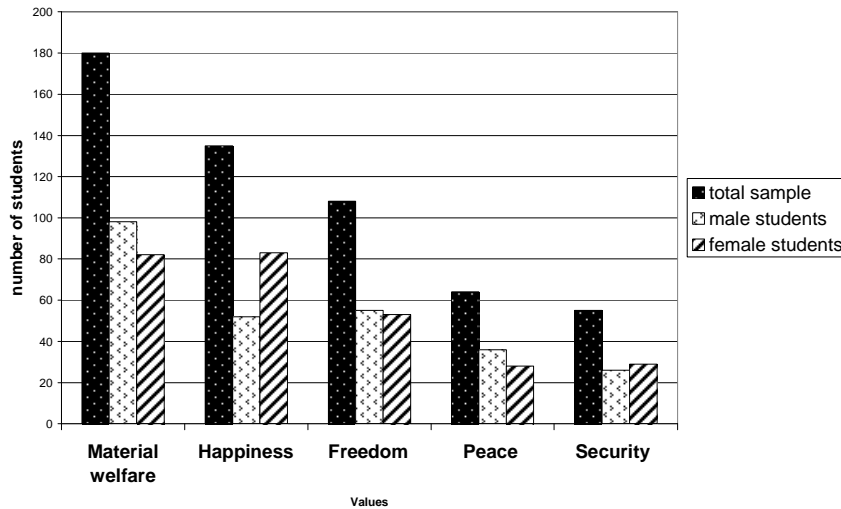
**Figure 6. Distribution of five values chosen by the total sample, male and female subsamples in first place**

All values appeared in first place but their distribution was different (Figure 6). Material welfare was selected for first place by most of the students. This trend is typical for men. Almost 140 respondents, mostly women, ranked happiness in first place. These differences between men and women were not significant. Fewer students (108) preferred freedom, and peace and security were the values least frequently selected for first place.

### (C) Values as life goals

*The values in four life situations*

Respondents were given four ambivalent life situations in which the actor had to choose from four solutions. We asked students to advise the actor which solution was the best. The four protagonists were in different life stages: a 19-year-old girl who had graduated from grammar school and had a boyfriend; a 30-year-old ambitious male engineer with a wife and parents; a 49-year-old woman sales manager with two adult children, divorced; a 64-year-old male pensioner with children and grandchildren who had had a successful career.

Each situation contained four possible outcomes, which represented four values:
    a. happy family, love relationship
    b. financial security, stability
    c. self-realisation (autonomy)
    d. migration (going abroad)
Value of happiness and material well-being were chosen from Rokeach's terminal values, the other two from interviews.

*1. The situation of the 19-year-old girl (Figure 7)*
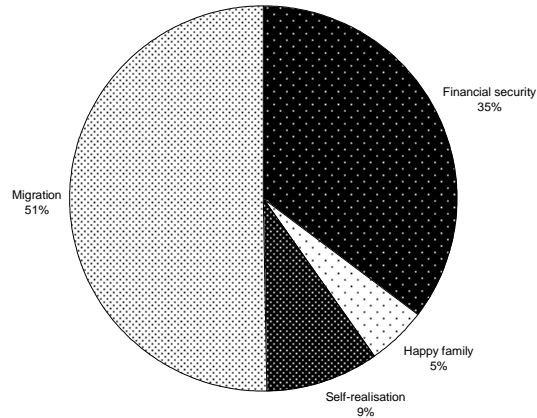
**Figure 7. The distribution of values (19-year-old girl)**

Half of the respondents thought that the best option for the young girl was to go abroad. One-third of students (35%) chose the value of financial security and stability, and fewer preferred only the value of self-realisation and family relations. In this life situation, the distribution of advice was similar in the whole group and in the different subgroups.

*2. The situation of the 30-year-old engineer (Figure 8)*
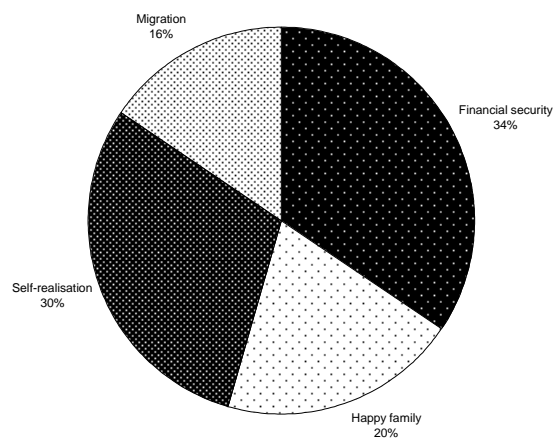


**Figure 8. The distribution of values (30-year-old engineer)**

The opinions concerning the ideal outcome of the second life situation were distributed in the sample. Most students chose financial security (34%), and only slightly fewer young people (30%) voted for the possibility of self-realisation. Every fifth respondent thought that family and love relationships represented the best outcome. The fewest students (16%) preferred the value of migration. This seems somewhat paradoxical, because just at the age when people are at their most active and dynamic, respondents proposed stability, which seems the most conservative solution.

Male and female students gave different advice: men were overrepresented in value of financial security, and women in the value of self-realisation (Pearson Chi square = 19.119, p = 0.000).

*3. The situation of the 49-year-old sales manager (Figure 9)*
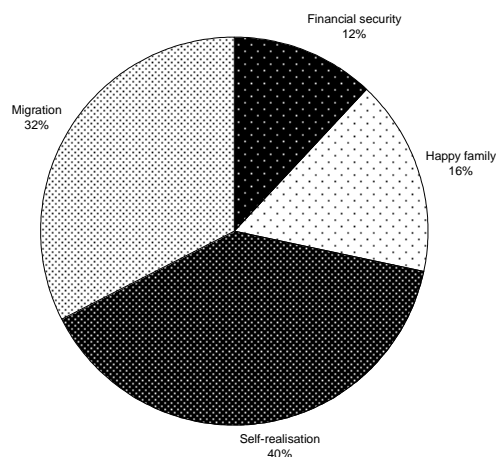


**Figure 9. The distribution of values (49-year-old sales manager)**

The relative majority of respondents (40%) preferred the value of self-realisation, and approximately one-third of students voted for the option of mobility in the third life situation. Far fewer (16%) chose the value of family relationships, and 12% of respondents considered financial security important.

In this situation more men than women chose the value of mobility, and women preferred self-realisation (Pearson Chi square= 23.47, p=0.000).

*4. The situation of the 64-year-old pensioner (Figure 10)*
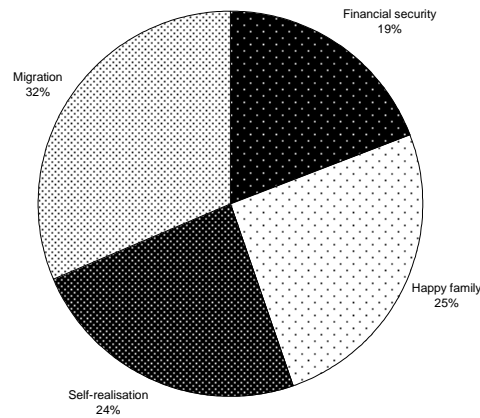
**Figure 10. The distribution of values (64-year-old pensioner)**

Nearly one-third of respondents accepted the option of migration in the fourth life situation, and 25-24% of students preferred the values of family relationships and self-realisation.. Roughly 20% of young people voted for financial security. The distribution of choices was similar in the whole group and in the different subgroups.

*(D) Determinants of Happiness*

Students had to estimate to what extent the ten factors contributed to happiness (Figure 11).
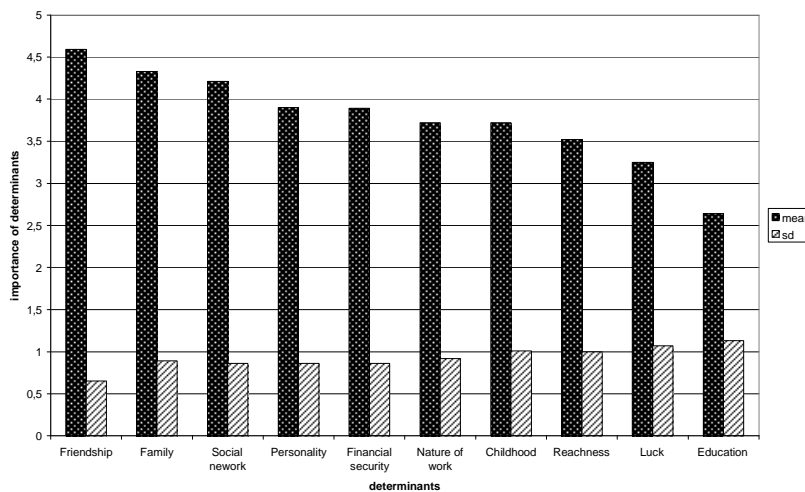


**Figure 11. Means and standard deviations of the determinants**

The meaning of the scale values: 1= not important at all, 5= very important

The most determinant items of happiness are friendship, family and relatives and social network. Students valued the following items as less important: richness and wealth, luck and chance and education.

After completing the factor analysis (Maximum Likelihood extraction method, results were corrected by Equamax rotation) we obtained three factors. The first factor which can be considered as social position contains four items: financial security, richness, education and nature of work. The second factor contains three items: friendship, family relations and social network. The core concept of this factor is social relationship. The third factor was determined only by luck and chance.

There was a very weak correlation between social position and social relationship (Pearson r=0.09, p= 0.047). Luck and chance determine happiness independently of the other two items.

**Summary and interpretation**

*I. Views about migration*

As a result of our investigation the following conclusions can be drawn. Most students prefer leaving Hungary, which is perceived as unhappy. They want to go to a happy country, where they can live and work for a longer period. The idea of working abroad is widespread and popular among Hungarian students. Considering the pattern of the preferences we can see that students accentuated different values in the various life stages. The choices, however, reflect that mobility and self-realisation are more dominant values than the others. The preferred countries are described by two major values. Most of the respondents linked the selected countries with material welfare and the value of happiness. In our opinion these three results can be connected by the idea of migration. The view comprises three elements: 1. going abroad is a real possibility for everybody; 2. it can be advantageous in any life stage; 3. material welfare and happiness are the most important motivation for migration.

*The appreciation of young people's plans for migration*

First, we should bear in mind that young people's ideas concerning migration are vague plans which may change later for many reasons, e.g. the development of thinking and emotions: more complex and realistic thinking can moderate extreme desires. One of the results of our investigation showed that 17-year-old pupils do not even think about working abroad, 18-year-old students would go for a longer period of time, and adults over nineteen do not plan a long stay abroad.

Second, migration also has benefits and positive outcomes for Europe and individual countries. On the one hand, academic and labour migration can increase the knowledge potential of a country, and on the other hand the culture of the recipient country and that of the migrants can become more closely related.

The content of life goals and the pursuit of migration depend on public opinion, public morale, and other historical, economic and social factors. Hungary has particular resonance in this respect. A number of sociological researches have proved that Hungarians have been dissatisfied with the level of democracy during the last ten years. People have no faith in political and government institutions. The level of generalised trust, community involvement and civic participation is rather low. If the Hungarian and European indexes are compared concerning these items, it is evident that Hungary is far from the European means (BruxInFo, 2007; Giczi, Sik, 2009). In summary, socialisation for effective citizenship, the development of ties to communities and ambition of civic activity (the factors of social capital) are the most important social issues for the development of Hungary.

## II. Representation of happiness

We have explored the two main domains of social representation concerning happiness: the life goals and the determinants of happiness. The field of the former comprises migration and self-realisation rather than social relations, as is reflected in the results for the four life situations. The students do not stress the value of social relations among life goals, since they do not perceive the lack of social attachment. People in adolescence and young adulthood perceive that they can manage their social relations well.

The other field of the representation includes determinants of happiness, in which the social network was the most accentuated element. Students stress that happiness is determined by social relationships rather than social position. The idea of positive relations with others, and the notion of relatedness, can be recognised in the students' ideas, which is parallel with the core concept of *eudaimonia* and self-determination theory (Ryff. Singer, 2008; Ryan, Deci, 2001).

The different fields of social representation about happiness do not construct a coherent belief system. The two domains of happiness function side by side and the value of social relations connects them.

Our pilot study explored the social representations of adolescents and young adults, however, and it is hypothesised that these ideas are shared by adult cohorts too. The two domains of happiness can be a common representation in the whole of Hungarian society, which has been newly constructed on the basis of economic and political changes in Europe.

### Education in Hungary

Happiness, material welfare and migration are the keywords in students' representation. The young people's idea about happiness reflects that these items are important values. The students do not seem to be really happy in Hungary, since personal thriving and happiness are more easily attainable abroad than at home, according to them.

Empirical findings from the field of sociology verified that happiness can be fostered by facilitating social support, participation in public institutions, and in private networks (Veenhoven, 2008a). Other results have proved the reciprocal effect of happiness and

trust in institutions (Brehm, Rahn, 1997). It can be concluded that happiness of young people must be modified by participation in their school community. When students take part in different activities in the class community, they can experience and practise the competencies of citizenship, such as responsibility, co-construction of rules, cooperation, and development of trust in others.

## References

Brehm, J., Rahn, W. (1997) Individual-level evidence for the causes and consequences of social capital. *American Journal of Political Science*. 41, 3, pp 999-1023

BruxInfo Európai Elemző Iroda, 2007. június. Politikai intézmények iránti bizalom és politikai részvétel az uniós tagországokban. BruxInfo European Analysing Office, 2007. june. Trust in political institutions and political participation in member states of EU

Frost, K.M., Frost, C.J. (2000). Romanian and American life aspirations in relation to psychological well-being, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 31, 6, pp 726-751. DOI: 10.1177/0022022100031006004

Giczi J., Sik E. (2009). Bizalom, társadalmi tőke, intézményi kötődés. Tárki Európai társadalmi jelentés. Giczi J., Sik E. (2009) Trust, social capital, attachment to institutions. Tárki, European Social Report

Lister, M., Pia, E. (2008). *Citizenship in contemporary Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Moscovici, S. (1973). Foreword., in C. Herzlich (ed.), *Health and illness: A social psychological analysis*. London: Academic Press.

Ryan, R.M., Deci, E.L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, pp 141-166

Ryan, M.R., Huta, V., Deci, E.L. (2008). Living well: a self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9, pp 139-170

Ryff, C.D., Singer, B.H. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9, pp 13-39. DOI 10.1007/s10902-006-9019-0

Uchida, Y. Norasakkunkit, V., Kitayama, S. (2004). Cultural constructions of happiness: Theory and empirical evidence. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 5, pp 223-239

Veenhoven, R. (2008a). Sociological theories of subjective well-being. in M. Eid., M.J. Larsen (eds.), *The science of subjective well-being*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Veenhoven, R., (2008b) World Database of Happiness, Distributional Findings in Nations, Erasmus University Rotterdam. worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl.

Veenhoven, R., (2009) *Average Happiness in 144 nations from 2000 to 2008,* World Database of Happiness, RankReport 1c, Internet: worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl