

French are 'taught to be gloomy by their culture'

Research finds that despite high standard of living happiness is elusive

France, once famous for its *joie de vivre*, is suffering from existential gloom – and the French have only themselves to blame for their malaise, according to a study to be presented in London next month. Research by a French academic to be delivered to the Royal Economic Society suggests that the country's citizens are "taught" to be miserable by elements of their own culture. Claudia Senik, a professor at the Paris School of Economics, argues that her country's education system and its cultural "mentality" make the French far less happy than their wealth and lifestyle suggest they should be. The French enjoy a high standard of living, Senik notes. The country has a generous welfare state, plus universal and free access to healthcare, hospitals, public schools and universities. It also has a 35-hour working week and many foreigners aspire to make it their home – 150,000 Britons have chosen to live there.

Yet the French are gloomy. A recent WIN-Gallup poll found that their expectations for the coming year ranked lower than those in Iraq or Afghanistan. The World Health Organisation notes that the suicide rate in France is much higher than in any of the "old European countries", with the exception of Finland. Suicide is the second biggest cause of mortality among 15-to-44-year-olds after road accidents, and the primary cause among 30-to-39-year-olds.

Senik claims that the "French paradox" – the fact that the country's general prosperity does not appear to translate into the happiness of its citizens – can be explained by "mental attitudes that are acquired in school or other socialisation instances, especially during youth".

She reached the conclusion after analysing data on life satisfaction, drawn from the European Social Survey, which indicates that French people are less happy than other Europeans on average. Crucially, however, Senik finds that French people who live in other countries report lower happiness levels than the natives, while immigrants who move to France are more happy than the indigenous population. The longer immigrants live in France and become part of its society, the less happy they claim to be. "This suggests that there is something in the culture that makes French people miserable," she claims.

A low level of life satisfaction among the French has been documented extensively as far back as the 1970s. One theory – that language could be a factor – appears to have been discounted by Senik. She finds that French-speakers in Switzerland or Canada are as happy as people from other communities.

Senik concludes that, if the French are to rediscover their sense of gaiety, their education system must play an important role in transforming its citizens' attitudes at an early age. "Happiness policies should take into account the irreducible influence of psychological and cultural factors," Senik writes. "As those are – at least partly – acquired in school and other early socialisation instances, this points to some new aspects of public policy, such as considering the qualitative aspects of the education system."

Senik's paper provoked a frenzied debate on the blogosphere and, perhaps inevitably, a large dose of introspection among her fellow citizens when it was published in France in her native language. Many saw Senik's paper as providing further evidence of France's decline. "I know countries incredibly poorer than ours and yet I can assure you that their population feels less unhappy than the majority of French, and yet they take it on the chin," one blogger said.

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Jamie Doward and Hussein Kesvani, The Observer, Sunday 24 March 2013

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