

**Rezumat:** Finlanda este una dintre țările cele mai de succes din punct de vedere al bunăstării și al educației. În același timp, este o țară a paradoxului. Recent votată „cea mai fericită țară din lume”, Finlanda are totodată o rată mare de sinucideri. Comparația socială poate fi o idee relevantă în înțelegerea paradoxului asocierii unei satisfacții depline în viață concomitent cu riscul ridicat de suicid în cazul unei populații vulnerabile. Suicidul este un fenomen cu multiple cauze. În Finlanda, cei mai relevanți factori par să fie sănătatea mintală, abuzul de substanțe nocive, în special alcoolul, dar și cultura finlandeză. Conceptul de “sisu” poate oferi o nouă perspectivă în paradoxul finlandez “fericire-suicid”.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Finlanda, „sisu”, suicid, satisfacția în viață, depresia, cultura

**Abstract:** Finland is one of the highest-ranking countries relative to well-being and education. However, it is also a country of paradoxes. Recently voted the happiest country in the world, Finland has notwithstanding a high suicide rate. Social comparison might be an important concept to consider as a potential explanatory factor leading to the paradox of a high life satisfaction but also higher suicide risk for a vulnerable population. Suicide is a multicausal phenomenon. In Finland, the most relevant factors seem to be mental health, substance abuse, and Finnish culture. The concept of “sisu” offers new insight into the Finnish happiness-suicide paradox.

**Keywords:** Finland, “sisu”, suicide, life satisfaction, depression, culture

### The Finnish happiness-suicide paradox

Finland is one of the top countries in the world regarding well-being and education. Its extensively studied high-performing education system is the result of decades of educational reform. Its main pillars are the Finnish culture, the welfare society and ethnic characteristics. Decentralized education management and increased school autonomy with well-trained teachers provide continuous quality improvement and enhanced equity, which have been the central themes in the modern Finnish education policies. It is often said that the secret of the Finnish education and welfare system lies in the society itself, all aspects of which rest on flexibility and creativity, as well as a profound respect for human rights (Sahlberg, 2009.).

Interestingly and conversely, studies indicate that Finnish students experience less anxiety and stress compared to other countries (OECD, 2004). Still, Finland has always had a higher-than-average rate of suicide. According to 2019 data, Finland rates 23<sup>rd</sup> in the world with 15.9 suicides per 100.000 inhabitants (Suicide Rate by Country 2019). After steadily declining ever since 1990, when 1500 persons committed suicide, in 2017 there were 824 suicide cases, 75% of which committed by men.

A specifically relevant problem is that, among the 14 – 25-year-old, suicide is the third cause of death (Wrede-Jantti, 2016). From 2016 onwards Finland experienced a slight increase in suicide rates again (www.stat.fi, 2017). This information seems to contrast with Finland’s recently received status of the world’s happiest country, according to the World Happiness Report, measuring subjective well-being (Helliwell et al., 2018). The report includes factors such as economic strength, social support, life expectancy, freedom of choice, generosity, and perceived corruption. All these factors are regarded as highly important and integral parts of Finnish society.

However, these account principally for stability of existence or general life satisfaction, which is not the same as happiness. This is even more prevalent when considering that Finns themselves were not impressed by these results. When, for instance, people were asked how often they experience positive emotions and experiences, Finland ranked much further from the top, on the 36-th place, with Latin-American countries dominating the list (Clifton, 2014). This seems more in accordance with the *Finns’ reputation of being emotionally withdrawn and reserved*.

Paradoxically, it seems though, that Finns’ aversion to happiness might make them generally happier. Martela (2018) argues that the *Finns’ tendency of downplaying their own sense of happiness and display of joy* might in fact be the secret of being more satisfied. Finns are happy to be content with their life conditions. *They are more preoccupied with equality and equity than ambitions and competitiveness*. This is reflected in every aspect of their life from education where the aim is to lift everyone up according to their own potential rather than concentrating on the talented few, to the social system where human dignity is respected above all else and people from the periphery are taken care of by the majority with no questions asked and no preconditions. *Humility is respected and arrogance or ambition is often frowned upon. Finns refrain from showing emotions and are very private. They need*

*a large personal space, where they can better protect their insecurities.* This privacy lets little space for social comparison.

As demonstrated by research, social comparison plays a significant role in life satisfaction. People tend to judge their well-being in comparison to others around them (Dalya et al., 2011). Interestingly, this argument seems to be in accordance also with the higher suicide rates experienced by high-income welfare countries like Finland. According to this hypothesis, people who feel discontented may feel unhappier in positive, happy places, and these contrasts may elevate suicide risk. Paradoxically, the same argument might therefore explain both the Finnish higher levels of general satisfaction but also the higher levels of suicide. For those who are unhappy, social comparison may lead to more unhappiness. This may mean that increasing life satisfaction by increasing well-being and reducing inequality could paradoxically produce more suicides as a side effect.

### **Finns and mental health**

In terms of mental health, Finland has an estimated rate of 15-20% of diagnosable mental health disorders (Pirkola et al, 2005). Depressive disorders are rated to be 6.5%, and are more common in the northern part of the country. The prevalence of seasonal mood disorders is 2,6% (ibid.), although there are more recent estimations of 10%. *Relative to suicide, cyclic time patterns have been observed, showing a marked fluctuation in their number, with two peaks: one in May and another one in October.* These coincide with the largest increase and drop in temperature and length of daylight.

One probable explanation of possibly many for this phenomenon might be that the temperature variations trigger changes in neurotransmitter regulations (ECNP, 2014), as well as other modifications, such as the metabolic activity in brown adipose tissue. These changes might be more problematic in people suffering from depression (Holipainen et al., 2013).

Another possibility might be related to changes in psychomotor retardation and anhedonia (lack of pleasure), two characteristics of depression, which manifest in extreme exhaustion and lack of taking any action due to a drop in certain neurotransmitters, such as norepinephrine, a stimulant commonly referred to as stress hormone, but also in dopamine, responsible for motivation. According to Sapolsky (Stanford, 2009), the probability of suicide increases when psychomotor retardation alleviates.

Due to the climate in Finland, long dark winter months are followed by an overabundance of sunlight during spring and summer. Research has shown that among the benefits of light is the enhancement of the dopamine function, alongside serotonin (Cawley et al., 2013). Similarly, bright light therapy has been shown to improve psychomotor retardation (Camardese et al., 2015). When the exhaustion is so severe that the simplest tasks are largely impossible to accomplish, the person is usually incapable of committing suicide. When, however, the extreme tiredness improves, the risk for actually doing suicide elevates. Spring and early summer is also the period of blooming and the positive experience of a new beginning, therefore it might pose a higher contrast to those more vulnerable, as stated above.

Alongside depression, substance abuse is another major burden of the Finnish public health. Alcohol abuse and dependency is the most common mental health disorder among men. There is also a strong link between alcohol consumption and suicide, with at least a quarter of the suicide cases committed under the influence of alcohol, and the rate is even higher in young adults: half in case of men and a third for women (Impinen et al, 2008).

### **SISU and suicide**

The causes of suicide are complex, encompassing psychological and sociocultural as well as economic factors. Age, gender, social support, employment status, harsh climate, etc., all have a role in suicide risk (Patana, 2014). The Finnish culture and values revolve around introversion, low emotional expressivity, low body language, modesty, honesty, quietness, individualism, and honor. (Helkama, 2010). Finns are stoic, introverted, reserved and resilient. Perhaps one of the most telling and representative expressions of *Finnish cultural identity* is "**sisu**", *a concept meaning resilience, strength of will, stoic determination in face of adversity, a sort of grim courage and resoluteness, often against the odds.*

It also speaks about Finnish pessimism as well as their consistent tenacity and deterministic persistence when facing challenges. This is the nation that during the winter of 1939, their glorious “winter war” (talvisota), was able to withstand the Russian army of one million soldiers for long months with an army of 175.000.

This characteristic attitude seems to be as paradoxical as Finland’s people being highly efficient but more suicidal than average. Honkasalo (2014) called this the “cultural ethos of “coping no matter what” or solitary self-control”, which seems to put a great load of pressure especially on Finnish men. They are four times more likely to commit suicide than women and are more violent in doing so. Lethal violence and homicide are also higher among Finnish men, more than twice compared to other Nordic countries (Honkasalo & Tuominen, 2014).

Analyzing suicide notes of Finnish men, Honkasalo (2014) concluded that *one major reason behind suicide is experienced worthlessness and social failure, mostly of middle-aged, unmarried men, with low socioeconomic and educational background. All these factors are interpreted as lack of personal value and ability, which comes from comparison with the idea of the “good Finnish man”, deeply rooted in the ethos of solitary self-control, the harsh norm of mastering one’s own life but always being able to do it alone. The resulting shame for norm-breakers are much represented in the music culture, for instance. In the land of heavy metal music, Finnish metal music lyrics abound with self-destructive drinking, which is used to overcome feelings of shame (Oksanen, 2017). Finnish men would rather die than expose their shame.*

As a final note, the Finnish paradox of happiness and suicide, with a specific type of dark humor, is very well represented in Arto Paasilinna’s novel “Charming mass suicide” (Hurmaava joukkoitsemurha, 1990). The novel tells the story of two Finnish men wanting to commit suicide at Midsummer, but since they picked the same hut for it, they end up saving each other through each other’s presence and company. Realizing others might need similar help, they put a small notice in a newspaper, asking potential suicide-ready people to contact them. And so, begins a weird suicide-club which travels by bus through much of Europe, to find the right place to die together, but not really managing to do it. The novel opens with the following, rather gloomy representation of Finnishness:

**“The most formidable enemies of the Finnish people are melancholy, sadness and apathy. An unfathomable weariness hovers over this miserable people and submits them under its yoke pushing their souls towards bleakness and seriousness. The weight of pessimism is such that many see in death the only remedy to their anguish. Spleen<sup>1</sup> is an opponent more relentless than the USSR.”**

### **Finland’s suicide prevention**

Finland has two suicide prevention centers in two of its major cities: Helsinki and Kuopio, operated by the Finnish Association for Mental Health (FAMH). The center offers support for those who attempted suicide or self-harm, as well as for people affected by suicide. Training in recognizing suicidal signs as well as in dealing with such situations are also available. All services are free of charge and require no referrals.

Since the number of attempted suicides is believed to be ten times higher than completed suicides, and previous attempted suicide rises the risk of further attempts by 60-100 % (Suomen mielenterveysseura, 2019), Finland tries to approach this challenge with its well-known determination. They have developed a suicide prevention model called LINITY intervention model (Lyhytinterventio itsemurhaa yrittäneille- Short time intervention for people who have attempted suicide), which has been proven to reduce further suicide attempts (Suomen mielenterveysseura, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The article tried to give some insight into the Finnish paradox of happiness-suicide. Happiness in Finnish terms is closer to a quiet contentment with own life circumstances and seeks, quite philosophically, life’s small everyday joys. Finns’ love and care of nature is well-known, with their cities even build around forests instead of building forests in the city. The cultural lack of the typical Western competitiveness is very well highlighted in an interview with a representative of the Finnish Ministry of Education who was confronted with the question regarding the latest curriculum change in

2016 about what happens if Finland drops in the PISA results due to the bold changes in the curriculum, to which she answered: “So what?” The main issue was to provide children with an up-to-date and meaningful education more than external results (need to find the source, I don’t remember now, but source will come soon).

Suicide is a complex phenomenon, which in Finland’s case seems to be closely connected to mental health, alcohol abuse, but also climate and especially cultural factors like the concept of “*sisu*”. There is always room for development, and this is especially true in case of suicide prevention where the stakes are about life itself. However, Finland seem to be addressing the topic with its renowned quiet effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> in Finnish: “musta mieli”, “dark mood”

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