Much of the social science research on social progress has concentrated on things that can be measured, like income, housing conditions, educational levels, health, and so on. While all of these are important, the amount of attention they receive may lead to a feeling that some of the more crucial but less tangible aspects of the good life are being left out of the picture. This chapter deals with one of these: subjective well-being or, in plainer language, happiness. It addresses one of the big ‘but’s that often arise in questions about the social impact of the Celtic Tiger: ‘We are wealthier than ever but are we any happier?’

The aim of the chapter is in part to attempt to answer this question directly, since some factual information is available that enables us to go some way in responding to it in its own terms. In part also, however, the concern is to query the question itself, since the usefulness of happiness as a yardstick of social progress is by no means self-evident. The chapter, therefore, gives some attention to what social science research on happiness tells us in general terms, as well as to the specifics of the situation in Ireland. The thrust of the argument is sceptical: the idea that an across-the-board deficit in human happiness is a real problem in today’s rich societies may be superficially compelling but seems doubtful on closer examination. Happiness may indeed be a vital human aspiration, and there are many afflicted people in the world today – mostly but not only in the poorer parts of the world – for whom a happier life is a real and urgently to-be-wished-for goal. It is a different matter whether the privileged majority in rich countries such as Ireland are, on the whole, seriously short-changed in happiness, whether there was a time in the past when they were substantially better off on this front than they are today, or whether a significantly higher plane of happiness is a real possibility for the future. At issue here are quite profound questions about the goals that the good society should be designed to pursue and, in the realm of human happiness, the limits of what is attainable within the constraints of the
human condition. This chapter cannot address these underlying questions, but it can present some thoughts and information that will throw light on the impact of the Celtic Tiger on the happiness of people in Ireland and what that tells us about the present condition of Irish society.

**Happiness: issues and trends**

Social science has recently discovered happiness, both as a subject of research and as a goal that human societies might be geared to pursue. Part of the impetus for this new interest is the accumulation of quantitative survey-based indicators which researchers in this area believe provide meaningful and reliable measures of subjective well-being in human populations (see the bibliography and databases on this issue in the World Database of Happiness at http://www.eur.nl/fsw/research/happiness). The two main dimensions of subjective well-being that are typically quantified in this way are happiness, which is viewed as the affective side of subjective well-being, and life satisfaction, which is thought to be based on cognitive evaluations of one’s day-to-day situation. In practice, these measures are based on survey questions that ask people how happy they are or how satisfied they feel either with life in general or with particular domains of daily existence. The various measures that are available on these dimensions are often grouped together under a single label of ‘happiness indicators’.

Based on a faith in the methodological soundness of these indicators, happiness has caught on as a research topic even in economics, the branch of the social sciences that traditionally was the least interested in human emotions (for a representative selection of work in this area, see Bruni and Porta, 2004). A recent prominent example is provided by Richard Layard’s book, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005). Layard, a leading British economist, sets out a now common view as to why happiness is important for social scientists and policymakers. He points to ‘a paradox at the heart of our lives’:

> Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier. … [W]e have more food, more clothes, more cars, bigger houses, more central heating, more foreign holidays … and, above all, better health. Yet we are not happier. (Layard, 2005, p. 3)

This ‘devastating fact’, in Layard’s view, should lead us to re-appraise our whole approach to how we try to improve our lot. Instead of continuous