FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING
and Their Implications for Empowerment

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Draft Date: December 19, 2002

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Concepts related to subjective well-being (SWB), as well as its measurement, give us insights in defining and measuring empowerment. SWB is defined as people’s evaluations of
their own lives. Such evaluations can be both cognitive judgments, such as life satisfaction, and emotional responses to events, such as feeling positive emotions. Subjective well-being is thus an umbrella term that refers to several separable components: life satisfaction and satisfaction with life domains such as marriage, work, income, housing, and leisure; feeling positive affect (pleasant emotions and moods) most of the time; experiencing infrequent feelings of negative affect (such as depression, stress, and anger); and judging one’s life to be fulfilling and meaningful.

Subjective well-being is necessary for quality of life, but is not sufficient for it. Why? SWB is necessary because it is difficult imagining a life, no matter how positive in objective respects, that we would label as ideal if the individual experiencing that life was dissatisfied and depressed. Therefore, SWB is necessary for us to consider a life an ideal one. SWB, however, is not sufficient because we would consider a happy person’s life incomplete if s/he was not free, or was missing other basic qualities that we consider necessary for dignity. Robert Nozick’s example of a hypothetical “experiencing machine” that can make people happy, even though they are only imagining happy experiences, is instructive here. The fact that most people do not want to be happy based on artificial experiences indicates clearly that most people do not simply want SWB – they want happiness coming from valuable experiences. However, just as SWB is not sufficient by itself for a good life, neither are economic or social indicators by themselves sufficient to indicate the well-being of a society – we want people to feel happy and fulfilled, not just live in a benign environment. Thus, SWB is a complement to objective indicators, in part because people’s choices are in part dependent on their feelings of well-being and their predictions about what will enhance their SWB.

Measuring SWB

Over the past decade substantial advances have been made in measuring SWB. Simple self-report survey instruments have been the mainstay of the field since its inception. Questions are asked such as: “How happy are you?” “How frequently do you feel happy?” and “How satisfied are you with your life?” Respondents typically give their response in terms of a numerical scale value. The survey items are moderately valid, and correlate tolerably well with other measures such as the reports of one’s family and friends about the target’s happiness. Nevertheless, there are research artifacts or biases that can influence these self-report scales, such as different self-presentational styles among respondents and memory biases for one’s experiences.

Because of the limitations of global self-report measures, a battery of measures can be employed for assessing SWB, which might include: experience-sampling (random sampling of moods and thoughts over time with a palm computer), informant reports from family and friends, biological measures (e.g., prefrontal brain asymmetry, the eyeblink startle response, cortisol levels), interviews, reaction time computer measures, and ratings of smiling. Taken together these measures provide a more accurate assessment of SWB, which can also shed more light on the psychological processes underlying SWB.

Our theoretical model indicates that there are four stages in well-being: 1. Environmental circumstances and events to which the person reacts, 2. The person’s immediate evaluative
reactions to these events, 3. A person’s recall of her or his reactions, and 4. A person’s global constructed judgments of his or her life. Each of these stages differs from the one before, and is translated from the stage before it through processes that are increasingly understood. Because of the intervening psychological processes occurring between stages, people’s circumstances and their life satisfaction are only modestly correlated.

**Selected Causes of SWB**

We know through studies of the SWB of twins, and other methodologies, that about half of the variance in SWB is due to genes, to a person’s inheritance. When reared apart, identical twins are more similar in SWB than are fraternal twins who are reared together. However, we know that conditions can, and do, influence SWB. For example, widows show dramatic drops in life satisfaction on average when their husbands die, and only very slowly over a period of five years on average return toward their former baselines of life satisfaction. Similarly, unemployed persons show a dramatic drop in SWB when they lose their jobs, and do not completely return to their former levels of SWB even after they obtain a new job, and even after controlling for income.

We know that social relationships are very important to happiness. In a group of very happy people we studied, every single individual had high-quality social relationships. Relationships are necessary, but not sufficient by themselves, for happiness.

Another cause of high SWB is making progress toward one’s personal goals. People have different values and goals, and so the type of success that makes them happy can be idiosyncratic, dependent on their aims. When we studied the types of resources that are most related to SWB, we found that personal attributes such as self-confidence were very important. It appears that individuals who feel self-confident and are thus “psychological empowered” are more likely to make progress toward their personal goals, and are more likely to be happy. In order to be empowered, people need to possess the resources to reach their goals, and also to have the psychological mindset that they can reach the goals, and will actively do so. Thus, objective resources, feelings of self-efficacy, and positive emotions all work together to create empowerment.

The effects of income on happiness have been studied in some detail (see Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002, for a review). In wealthy nations there are small, but positive, correlations between income and reports of happiness. For instance, there are more poor people who report dissatisfaction with life than there are wealthy individuals who report such dissatisfaction. These findings have been replicated hundreds of times. However, the correlations between income and happiness are often larger in poorer nations. This finding is usually interpreted to mean that increases in income make more difference to SWB at poverty levels than they do in higher income strata.

When one examines the mean level of happiness of nations, and plots these figures against per capita income, there is often a curvilinear relation such that the rise in SWB is steep in the lower income ranges, and barely increases among countries in the higher levels of income. Wealthy nations show higher SWB on average than do poorer ones, but of course wealthy
nations are more likely to have more equality, greater longevity, and other desirable characteristics beyond more material goods.

When one examines changes in SWB over the decades, there is often little movement in wealthy nations such as the USA or Japan. This is often interpreted to mean that income makes little impact on SWB once basic needs are met. However, one finds that material desires have increased at about the same rate, as has real income in the USA. Therefore, the absence of increases in SWB might be due to the fact that people’s material desires have increased at the same rate as their real incomes. There are other plausible explanations for why SWB often has not increased over time as developed nations have become wealthier, although these explanations have not been rigorously tested against one another. An explanation that brings together the idea of basic needs with an explanation in terms of discrepancy from desires as the explanatory variable is that needs drive desires, but other factors such as social comparison can also influence desires. It is the extent to which people can meet their desires, in turn, that directly influences SWB.

We have studied people who live materially simple lives – the Amish in the USA, the slum dwellers of Calcutta, the East African Maasai, the Inughuit of Northern Greenland, and homeless individuals in Calcutta and the USA. Of these groups, the Maasai (who rarely have electricity, indoor plumbing, or quality health care) show the highest SWB, and the homeless in California show the lowest SWB (despite income superior to that of the Maasai). Recall that social relationships are very important to SWB, and in this domain of life the Maasai are better off than the California homeless. Clearly, there are psychological influences on SWB beyond objective material circumstances.

Cultural Influences on SWB

Latin Americans usually report higher levels of SWB than do East Asians. It appears that Latin Americans are more approach-oriented, focusing on desirable goals, whereas East Asians are more avoidance oriented in their goals, focusing on avoiding bad outcomes. In addition, Latin Americans believe that positive emotions are very desirable; whereas East Asians believe that positive emotions and negative emotions are almost equally appropriate.

Cultures can be arrayed on a continuum ranging from individualistic (individual well-being and choice are granted high importance) to collectivistic (the group is seen as more important than the individual). It appears that both types of societies have their own costs and benefits. Individualistic societies offer people greater personal freedom, and on average people in these societies report high SWB. However, these cultures also have high levels of certain pathologies such as divorce, suicide, and crime. They have high marital satisfaction rates and, paradoxically, high divorce rates. They experience high average SWB, and yet on average also have higher levels of suicide. One explanation is that in individualistic societies people receive credit for their successes, but also feel the sting of failure more strongly. It might also be that the extended families of collectivistic cultures impair people’s freedom, but also provide a safeguard against loneliness and the acting out of aberrant behaviors.

Is Happiness a Good Thing?
Besides feeling good, is high SWB a desirable thing? Research, almost all of which has been conducted in western nations, suggests that the experience of positive emotions leads to a syndrome of related behavioral characteristics: 1. Sociability, 2. Feelings of self-confidence and energy, 3. Engaged activity, 4. Altruism, 5. Creativity, and 6. Perhaps better immune functioning and cardiovascular fitness. Because there are longitudinal and formal experimental studies on the effects of positive emotions, we know that these emotions often cause the listed attributes, and are not simply a result of them. It should be noted that several of the characteristics associated with positive emotions sound similar to empowerment in that the happy individual is self-confident and likely to pursue approach-goals in an active way.

Chronically happy people exhibit the above characteristics, and individuals who are in a temporary positive mood also exhibit the characteristics listed above. It is not surprising, then, that happy people are more successful in a number of life domains: they have more friends, are more likely to get married and stay happily married, they make more money on average, are more likely to receive superior ratings from their supervisors at work, are more likely to be involved in community and volunteer activities, are more likely to fill leadership roles; and possibly they live longer. It should be mentioned, however, that virtually all of the research findings are from western nations, especially the USA, and therefore we do not know the degree to which happy people are more successful in other cultures.

Empowerment

There are a number of lessons about empowerment that we can draw from the research literature on subjective well-being. First, there are likely to be both objective and subjective facets of empowerment – the actual conditions that allow a person to be efficacious, and the subjective belief that one can be effective, which in turn leads to goal-directed action.

Second, we can probably assess psychological empowerment with simple self-report instruments, and obtain moderately valid scores. At the same time, more accurate assessment will require a battery of assessment devices, including self-reports, experience sampling, an assessment of environmental conditions, informant reports, and assessment by trained experts. Success at measuring empowerment across cultures is especially likely to come from a battery of measures because there are substantial challenges in comparing simple self-report scores across cultural groups. Ultimately, scientific understanding will come from determining how the various measures relate to one another. Like subjective well-being, psychological empowerment is likely to be multidimensional, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral components.

Third, psychological empowerment is likely to result from high SWB, especially from positive emotions. People who are chronically happy are likely to feel more empowered than unhappy individuals. Of course the aims for which they use their empowered feelings will depend on their goals and values. Because positive emotions are likely to arise from goal success, people are more likely to feel empowered and to seek new goals when they have been successful in the past, and perceive that they have the resources to meet their goals. That is, empowered feelings and successful action can form a self-reinforcing loop, but repeated failures
and the resulting negative emotions can stop the cycle of psychological empowerment, and result in depression or resignation.

Thus, empowered feelings are likely to arise from good events occurring in a person’s life, which create positive emotions. However, concrete self-efficacy and empowerment for specific goals and tasks also depend on a person’s skills and resources in that specific area, as well as on actual objective circumstances which allow successful actions.

Further Reading


