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Societal Happiness

Building happier societies through positive social connections

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Social, pro-social, national happiness, policies for happiness, benevolence

Introduction

Over the past fifty years, there has been a growing interest in using subjective well-being to measure and compare national well-being, and to choose policies that can help to build better lives (Easterlin, 1975; Diener et al., 2009). This chapter explains how research has progressed, demonstrating the central importance of the social fabric (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Building happier lives therefore requires more attention to be paid to how people connect and cooperate with each other at home, in their neighborhoods, workplaces and institutions.

Well-directed benevolence improves the lives of the helpers as well as those being helped. People are much happier living in communities where benevolence prevails. However, people are generally too pessimistic about the benevolence of others, thereby losing happiness and being less likely to connect with others for the benefit of all. This chapter lays out the nature of the underlying research and suggests improvements to measurement and policies to enable happier lives.

How should subjective well-being be measured for policy use?

In June 2011 the UN General Assembly adopted a Bhutanese resolution calling on national governments to prioritize happiness and well-being. This was followed up by a High-Level meeting at the United Nations in April of 2012. The first World Happiness Report (WHR) was prepared to support

that meeting by reviewing the data and science available to better measure and understand subjective well-being.

The first OECD meeting for National Statistical Offices on the measurement of subjective well-being, held in Florence in 2009, involved discussions about the relative advantages of current emotions (denoted 'experienced well-being' by Kahneman) versus an overall judgment about the quality of life as a whole (seen as a cognitive or evaluative measure). Attending officials from national statistical offices were initially skeptical of all subjective measures, something that has gradually changed in subsequent years.

The OECD guidelines (OECD 2013) developed following the Florence meeting had a core model which included life satisfaction and both positive and negative emotions, with life satisfaction to be given priority if a choice had to be made.

Views differ about how best to use these alternative measures for policy analysis. Ed Diener (Diener, 2006) favoured a tripartite package of life satisfaction, positive emotions and negative emotions, with priority to be given to the former. Danny Kahneman (Kahneman et al., 1997) argued instead for binary measures of current emotions, with his preference being for the net balance of positive and negative emotions, as embodied in the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004). The first rounds of the Gallup World Poll, for which Diener and Kahneman were the principal scientific advisers, thus contained a life evaluation question on a scale from zero to ten, and several binary questions on the frequency of various positive and negative emotions on the previous day.

The main international surveys considered in the first World Happiness Report included the Gallup World Poll, the European Social Survey, and the World Values Survey. The surveys used different central questions to evaluate the overall quality of life: the Cantril ladder in the Gallup World Poll, life satisfaction in the World Values Survey, and both life satisfaction and a 'happy with life' question in the European Social Survey. The Gallup World Poll fortunately included the life satisfaction question in one round of the survey. This made it possible to triangulate the evidence to show the rough comparability of all three questions, when assessed by their consistency in estimating what supports better lives. Research comparing the life satisfaction and Cantril ladder as alternative life evaluations found them to attach very similar weights to various right-hand-side variables (Helliwell et al., 2010).

The original World Happiness Report (WHR 2012), after reviewing the international evidence of different aspects of subjective well-being, came down in favour of placing primary emphasis, as did the OECD's Guidelines (OECD, 2013) under preparation at the same time, on individuals' subjective evaluations of the quality of their own lives. Subsequent Reports, making primary use of data collected by the Gallup World Poll from more than 140 countries, have used weighted averages of individual life evaluations as the basis for national rankings and for use in research attempting to explain the factors supporting better lives.

What are the advantages of an umbrella measure of individual well-being?

1. A single easily understood measure, if it can be credibly linked to well-being as broadly understood, provides at the aggregate level a natural alternative to using GDP as an appropriate measure of national well-being.
2. These data can then be used, averaged at the national level, as dependent variables for research attempting to unravel the plausible sources of international differences in well-being.
3. If these data can be collected in national surveys of sufficient size, they provide geo-coded data enabling for fine-grained comparisons across cities and neighbourhoods, enriched by interactions with age, ethnicity, language and country of birth.
4. Research attempting to explain the relative importance of various factors can then be used to undertake cost-benefit analysis allowing the rankings of alternative policies so as to allocate the available resources to support subjective well-being (Layard & O'Donnell, 2015; Frijters et al., 2021).

Is happiness the right name for an umbrella measure?

The World Happiness Report justifies its title by arguing that there are two quite different uses of the word happiness. One is to describe the emotion of happiness, as in questions about happiness yesterday. The second use is judgmental, asking whether one is happy about something. These judgements can range from how happy one is about how a vacuum cleaner is operating to how one feels about one's life as a whole, as in the ESS happiness question referred to earlier. Linguistic philosophers (Grice, 1975) argue that any potential ambiguity is resolved by the logic of the conversation in which the word is used. This is confirmed by survey research. Answers to the emotion question depend on what was going on the day before, while happiness with life reflects a longer-term judgment more based on the overall pattern of life. Thus, there is evidence of weekend effects in answers by workers to questions about happiness and other emotions yesterday, but not in evaluations of life as a whole (Helliwell & Wang, 2014; 2015).

Definition: Societal Happiness:

Societal happiness refers to the average level of subjective life evaluation within a society. It is commonly measured by asking individuals to assess their overall quality of life on a scale from 0 (worst possible life) to 10 (best possible life).

Measuring and reducing happiness inequality

Just as subjective well-being is a better indicator of human welfare than is income, so is the inequality of subjective well-being a better measure of inequality (Goff et al., 2018) than the much more studied inequality of income. The collection of individual life evaluations of a 0 to 10 scale, as recommended by the OECD Guidelines and done in the Gallup World Poll, enables wellbeing inequality to be calculated as the standard deviation of the individual reports, enabling the distribution of well-being to be calculated, and explanations to be sought. Recent research shows (Chapter 2 of WHR 2025, Figure 2.5) that well-being inequality has grown by roughly one-quarter over the past two decades within countries, while remaining roughly constant among countries. Research has also shown that several indicators of positive social connections, including several measures of social trust (Helliwell et

al., 2017, Figure 18.1), benevolent acts and expected return of lost wallets (Chapter 2 of WHR 2025, Figure 2.4) all reduce the inequality of well-being by being of especial advantage to those most likely to be among the least happy members of society, including the unemployed, those in ill-health, feeling subject to discrimination, of expecting to suffer from bad mental health or violent crime.

Thus positive social connections of several types raise average well-being and reduce its inequality by providing the largest increases in happiness for the most miserable.

Why focus policy on the creation of happiness rather than the reduction of misery?

Some have argued that policy actions should be directed especially to reducing misery rather than creating happiness. Near the end of his decades of pioneering well-being research, Kahneman came to accept the primacy of life evaluations over emotional reports, and to advocate more attention to reducing misery (Kahneman, 2022). Chapter 3 of the first WHR compared the causes of happiness and misery, with those in misery defined to be those with responses of 4 and below on the 0 to 10 scale for life evaluations, and found their responses to be very similar to those for the population as a whole.

There are four fundamental and fundamentally different reasons for emphasizing the creation of happiness over the elimination of misery. The first has just been mentioned: that the causes of happiness are very similar for those in misery as for the population as a whole. The second is that cost-benefit analysis designed to choose policies promising the largest improvements to well-being often apply most directly those in misery, since they offer the most scope for improvements. Third, social trust and universal welfare policies are mutually supportive, while targeted policies threaten shared social identities. Fourth, to focus on removing ill-being rather than building well-being simply replicates the early shortcomings of clinical psychology that inspired the creation of positive psychology. Each of these last two points merits deeper analysis. I shall deal with them in turn.

Social trust and the welfare state. Rothstein (1998, 2010) and Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) have made the case that universal welfare programmes are both a cause and a consequence of high levels of social trust. In a sufficiently high trust environment, universal social programmes gain broad political acceptance by efficiently providing equal services for all, while avoiding the stigmatization and high administrative costs of programmes more directly targeted to those seen to be in misery. High levels of social trust facilitate the evolution and maintenance of efficient and trustworthy institutions, which in turn can efficiently provide high quality and equally distributed health care, education and other public services that provide equality of opportunity in a universal manner. By contrast, they argue, where social trust is low, social identities become narrower and more parochial, with the interests of different population groups seen as conflicting with each other. This leads to the demands for policies that target benefits toward one's own group, while creating stigma within the groups chosen for targeted benefit and resentment among those who see themselves as paying the costs of benefits from which they are excluded.

The Importance of positive social connections. Population-level research in recent decades shows the importance of the social and institutional context. People are far happier living where kind acts are

the norm, but routinely underestimate the importance and the prevalence of kindness. Why is this the case? Perhaps the single biggest reason is the still-prevailing negativity bias leading people to be more likely to notice and remember the bad things than good ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). This bias is exemplified by both conventional and social media news sources (“if it bleeds, it leads”). Thus what is supposed to be balanced coverage of the state of the world and its people itself has a negative bias, thereby exaggerating the already prevalent negativity bias. Although people may be drawn towards and be exposed to bad news, one of the basic research findings from positive psychology has been the importance of the positive for future health and happiness (Danner et al., 2001; Pressman et al., 2019). Similarly, WHR research (WHR 2024, Figure 2.12) shows feelings of social support to be much more frequent than feelings of loneliness in all generations and global regions, and to have greater influence on overall happiness.

The positivity effect as an age-related correction. One of the puzzles of age-related happiness changes is to explain why in many countries people get happier as they move past middle-age. Two key correlates of life evaluations— self-assessed physical health and the size of social networks— decline after middle age, and yet people do not suffer a decline in feelings of social support (Figure 2.12 in WHR 2024). The leading explanation is that of an age-related positivity effect (Carstensen, 2006; Reed et al., 2014) whereby as people age they learn to overcome the negativity bias by paying more attention to positive circumstances, and more easily forgetting negative images (Charles et al., 2003; Mather & Carstensen, 2003).

Further evidence of an age-related increase in willingness to think well of others comes from data from many countries showing age-related increases in several sorts of trust, including generalized trust and trust in friends, neighbours and strangers (Li & Fung, 2013). While trust is a well-established predictor of happiness (Helliwell & Wang, 2011; Helliwell et al., 2017), are there related risks that the positivity effect may increase enough to exceed the initial negativity bias for older adults? Could older populations become too trusting, and thereby expose themselves unduly to risk of harms, including especially scams (Burnes et al., 2017)? Until very recently, there was no comparable evidence on the relative fraud susceptibility of the young and the old. New experimental evidence shows older adults to be less likely to fall for the scam than younger ones (Walzak, 2023).

The special role of benevolence. People are happier when they undertake benevolent acts and even more so when they see themselves living where others would come to their aid by returning a lost wallet (Chapter 2 of WHR 2025, Figure 2.4). Survey evidence shows the importance of living in a trustworthy and supportive environment, while experiments show that the negativity bias is prevalent enough to lead people to lose happiness by being unfairly pessimistic about the benevolence of others. The survey evidence shows that to live where you think wallet return is very likely whether found by a stranger, a neighbour, or a police officer improves life evaluations by far more than being free of the risks of mental ill-health, violent crime and unemployment, and dwarfs the effects of higher income.

The evidence from experimentally dropped wallets shows that actual wallet return is indeed higher in countries where people believe it to be higher, but that everywhere people are too pessimistic about the kindness of others, with the actual return of wallets being about twice as high as expected (WHR 2025, online wallet appendix).

Case vignette of a policy example

To get the importance of a positive social environment better understood, and linked to policy choices, requires convincing evidence. The Canadian Employment Innovation Project (Gyarmati et al. 2008) experimentally transferred people from welfare or unemployment benefits to work on community-building projects selected by the communities in which they lived. When policy evaluation was extended to include the value of the social trust improvements created at the community level, using values drawn from well-being research, the net advantages of the programme were significantly higher. The details are available in Helliwell et al. (2022, and Appendix).

Critical Perspectives

What are some of the criticisms that have been raised about the ways in which happiness research has been used here, and in the World Happiness Report, to evaluate human progress at the individual and national levels? A recent paper (VanderWeele & Johnson, 2025) makes a contrast between multi-dimensional and unidimensional approaches to well-being, with their preference strongly in favour of the former, and the WHR being seen as an example of the latter. In my view this is a false contrast, as all approaches to the study of well-being must be multidimensional, since there are many separate aspects of life that need measurement and understanding if one wants to learn anything important about well-being. Thus OECD governments attaching special importance to well-being adopt multidimensional approaches, as indeed they should.

Although all approaches to well-being are inherently multi-dimensional, there are contrasting ways to use data about the various aspects of well-being. The WHR gives life evaluations a central over-arching role. As already noted, these data provide the information needed to do cost/benefit analysis informing policy choices, and can be geo-coded to combine with other variables at all levels of geographic and demographic detail. These functions cannot be performed by any expert list-driven approaches to well-being, each giving a different ranking of national well-being. We prefer to let individuals provide the basic data, and use the other variables to help explain what makes for better lives.

Another criticism of reliance on people's evaluations of their own lives is whether it is right to include the happiness of those doing harm to others. To answer this question properly requires us to distinguish the consumption from the production of happiness. People are both consumers and producers of happiness. The happiness they experience (or consume) is based on their own actions and those of others, set within an institutional framework that either furthers or frustrates the achievement of happiness. The happiness they produce includes the good or harm they create for others. The happiest societies are ones that encourage its production and equitable distribution.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter reviews a range of evidence showing the power of positive social connections and institutions that foster trust and kindness to improve life. Individuals' evaluations of their own lives are used to monitor the quality of life both within a nation and across national boundaries. These data are then used to explain what makes for better lives for individuals and for nations. This research exposes the power of positive social connections, of trustworthy and efficient institutions, and of a benevolent social environment.

One of the main takeaways from well-being research is that people generally enjoy doing benevolent acts and living in a society where such actions are the norm rather than the exception. Aristotle saw virtue as an essential part of a good life, and something to be encouraged, not just because virtue is its own reward but also because it is the foundation of a society where the production of happiness is great, its distribution equitable, and its institutions honest and efficient in facilitating well-being. Producers of happiness, or 'felicitors' (Helliwell et al 2011), may include individuals, places, activities and institutions.

To make lives better for others provides the most direct route to a happier society. Happiness research is needed to rank the policy options. This is a long journey for which well-being research is already providing crucial sign posts.

Further Reading

World Happiness Reports 2012-2025, found at: <https://www.worldhappiness.report/analysis/>

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