

# Subjective Wellbeing: Telling Only Half the Story

## A Commentary on Diener et al. (2012). Theory and Validity of Life Satisfaction Scales. *Social Indicators Research*

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**Abstract** A new paper presents a strong case for life satisfaction scales (Diener et al. in Soc Indic Res. 2012). However, it underestimates two important weaknesses in subjective wellbeing (SWB) measures: the contrast between individual satisfaction and social discontent; and the contradictory evidence on the benefits of personal freedom. This commentary argues that SWB, like other conventional indicators, is measuring Westernization or modernization, rather than improved quality of life or human progress and development. The concepts may overlap, but they are not the same thing. At best, the qualities being measured may be desirable, even necessary, but are not sufficient. At worst, the benefits of modernization are being counted, but not its costs, which are substantial and increasing.

**Keywords** Freedom · Happiness · Human development · Individualization · Life satisfaction · Modernization · Progress · Subjective wellbeing

### 1 Introduction

The new paper by Ed Diener and his colleagues presents a persuasive and compelling argument in favor of measures of subjective wellbeing (SWB) (Diener et al. 2012). The authors carefully review the reliability, validity, and sensitivity to change of life satisfaction measures, arguing that several lines of evidence indicate that the scales validly reflect the quality of respondents' lives. However, they remain cautious about using SWB indicators to inform national policy decisions. The scales are useful in research on individual wellbeing, but there are questions about applying them to policy that need more analysis and research.

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Life satisfaction can provide an added window on what is going well or badly in a society, as experienced by the citizens themselves. There are specific instances where life satisfaction measures can help illuminate current policy debates, but being able to tie the scores to factors that bear on policy is essential. Given their low cost and ease of administration it is desirable that societies adopt measures of life satisfaction to supplement current economic and social indicators. At the same time it must be recognized that life satisfaction measures have clear limits, and provide only one type of information to policy makers. Thus, additional types of objective and subjective indicators are needed.

The paper is, then, an important contribution to the remarkable surge in interest in measuring the progress of societies. The debate has focused on adequacy of economic indicators, notably per capita income or GDP (gross domestic product). Measures of SWB, especially happiness and life satisfaction, are attracting particular attention, with several international bodies and national statistical agencies examining their value for inclusion in sets of indicators of national progress.

In this commentary, I want to address two issues raised in the Diener et al. paper that reinforce the limitations in using SWB, especially in assessing and comparing nations: the gap between social discontent and personal life satisfaction; and the role of personal freedom in SWB.

## 2 Personal Satisfaction and Social Disquiet

The authors report research findings that help to explain something that I have pointed out repeatedly in my writing: asking people about life in general or the lives of others gives a very different result from asking them about their own lives (Eckersley 2000a, b, 2005, 2009, 2012, in press). In the cited study, political questions sometimes came before, and sometimes after, the life evaluation question. People's life evaluation scores were lower when they followed the political questions. Inserting a buffer or transition question—"Now thinking about your personal life, are you satisfied with your personal life today?"—between the political questions and life evaluation largely eliminated the item-order effect. The authors suggest the effect might have been due to the way questions were interpreted rather than to the priming of certain information. 'The political questions at the beginning of the interview may have induced respondents to think the survey was about people's lives embedded in the context of societal and political affairs.'

This raises an obvious question: why would we want to buffer against this effect? If we are using SWB as a societal rather than an individual measure, surely we should take into account the social and political context. The authors note that national differences show 'society-wide conditions can have an enormous impact on life satisfaction', thus showing that 'the scales do not just reflect aspects of the personal quality of life of respondents'. However, this does not mean the scales account adequately for the social context beyond its effect on personal circumstances. The two perspectives can be very different; both matter. 'Americans are losing confidence in the nation but still believe in themselves', reads the headline of a story in *The Atlantic* in 2012 (Penn 2012).

In a wave of pessimism that has been pervasive throughout the last decade (perhaps the longest running in American history), Americans believe their country is heading in the wrong direction, that our values are weathering, that their generation is worse off than their parents' generation, and that their children will be still worse off.

Americans believe that political corruption, too much focus on material things, and the influence of money in politics are weakening our values and standing in the world. They believe elected officials reflect and represent mainly the values of the wealthy and think the economic system is unfair to middle- and working-class Americans. And they believe that Wall Street is more like a cancer than an engine for economic growth.

In 2011, *Time* magazine reported a poll showing that the United States is going through ‘one of its longest sustained periods of unhappiness and pessimism ever’, adding that it is ‘hard to overstate what a fundamental change this represents’ (Penn 2011). Two-thirds of Americans believed the past decade was one of decline, not progress, for the US (68 %), and that the greatest threat to the long-term stability of the US came from within, not from outside, the country (66 %). A half said the past decade was one of the worst in the past 100 years (47 %) and that American children today would be worse off than people were now when they grew up (52 %).

Australia ranks among the top nations in many international comparisons of quality of life and development. Since the Global Financial Crisis, it has been the envy of other advanced economies: there was no recession, unemployment did not rise, and national debt is manageable. Australians have nothing to whine about, social and political commentators have claimed. Despite this, public disquiet persists, and voters seem to become quickly disappointed in new leaders and governments. In a 2009 survey, only 24 % of people said that, taking into account social, economic, and environmental conditions and trends, life in Australia was getting better (ANU Poll 2009). In another 2009 survey, Australians today saw themselves as richer, but unhappier (or no happier), than they were in the previous few decades (Auspoll 2009). While 77 % said Australians’ material standard of living was higher than 20 years ago, 58 % felt emotional wellbeing was lower.

The findings stand in stark contrast to people’s high levels of personal happiness and life satisfaction.

Why do we persist in telling only half the story?

### 3 The Mixed Blessings of Freedom

The second issue raised in the Diener et al. paper has to do with equating progress with modernization.

The authors say that the theory of evolutionary modernization states that people’s values and life strategies change as they move from subsistence-level scarcity to high levels of economic and physical security. At low levels of development, sheer survival tends to be the dominant goal and happiness is closely linked with whether one has enough of life’s basic necessities. As people attain higher levels of economic and physical security they attach greater importance to having free choice in how to live their lives. The authors present data on international comparisons showing this: as we move from low-income nations to high, financial satisfaction becomes less important to overall life satisfaction, and free choice becomes more important.

A lot of research shows that personal freedom is a major determinant of progress and human development in cross-country comparisons. In another study, Inglehart and his colleagues linked happiness to the extent to which a society allows free choice; free choice was, in turn, associated with economic development, democratization, and social liberalization (Inglehart et al. 2008). Yet studies of the role of freedom (as we construe it), both

empirical and theoretical, tell a different story (Eckersley and Dear 2002; Eckersley 2006, 2007, 2009).

Freedom can be disturbing as well as exciting; while it creates new opportunities for personal experience and growth, it also carries risks of social dislocation and isolation, and a cultural attenuation that makes self-identity problematic. This is clear in the sociological work on the centrality of individualization to late-modern or postmodern life, which is marked by a heightened sense of insecurity, uncertainty and risk, and a lack of clear frames of reference. Freedom is implicated in the increased rates of mental health problems among Western youth (which are also at odds with the SWB data) (Eckersley 2005, 2009, 2011).

A new study in Finland (which, with other Scandinavian countries, does well in international comparisons of progress and development) casts fascinating light on this question (Lindfors et al. 2012). It assessed changes in fears for the future of Finnish youth, based on adolescent health and lifestyle surveys carried out in 1983, 1997, and 2007. A total of 17,750 students aged 12–18 were asked an open question: “When you think about your life and the future in general, what three things do you fear the most?”

Surprisingly, fear of war and terrorism fell over the period, as did fear of environmental disasters. Fear about work and education did not change much, again surprising given the changes in these areas. However, other, more personal fears rose: failure and making wrong choices (from 7 to 16 %), future family and partnership (7 to 14 %), loneliness (5 to 20 %), accidents (6 to 12 %), health (16 to 41 %), and death (17 to 39 %).

The authors conclude that perceptions of risks have become more individualized, thus supporting late-modernist theory. Adolescents’ images of the future act as a mirror of the times, reflecting the values and ethos of society and its social and cultural norms and their changes over time, they say. ‘Cultural and societal changes, including emphasis on individual choice and increased uncertainty, seem to create perceptions of uneasiness and insecurity in young people’s transitions to adulthood.’

The existential dimension of the analysis can be taken further. In psychology, terror management theory argues that fear of mortality is a powerful motivation for humans, and they construct personal and cultural means to manage it, to allow them accept the inevitability of death—worldviews, values, beliefs, rituals. So the Finnish findings of increased fear of death might be further evidence of how Western societies are failing their people.

The Diener et al. paper does not address this paradox of freedom; again, it tells only half the story. One possibility, which links both the issues I have raised, is that there is a bias in SWB scores in favor of individualistic societies, in which people place less emphasis on the social context and more on personal aspects of life.

The two issues support my broader argument that conventional indicators and models of progress, including SWB, are measuring Westernization or modernization, rather than optimal human progress or development (Eckersley, 2009, 2012, in press). While the concepts may overlap, they are not the same thing. At best, the qualities being measured may be desirable, even necessary, but are not sufficient. At worst, the benefits of Western culture are being counted, but not its costs, which are formidable and growing.

#### 4 Conclusion

I am impressed by the consistency of SWB findings, the many aspects of life they do seem to measure, as the Diener et al. paper demonstrates. Yet the research needs to venture beyond SWB and its correlates to take other, more diverse data into account. (This is why transdisciplinary synthesis is a powerful supplementary research methodology, seeking

coherence in the overall conceptual picture, rather than rigour in the empirical detail as most research does [Eckersley, 2005, 2007]).

SWB measures are still missing a critical dimension of human wellbeing: the more intangible, cultural, moral, and existential aspects of life that reflect and reveal the depths of the human psyche and the complexities of human affairs. Supplementing money measures with happiness or life satisfaction does not solve the problem. Although wellbeing research has revealed the importance of things other than money, there remains a substantial gap in progress measures, even those incorporating SWB.

The orthodox approaches underestimate the degree to which ‘progress’ or ‘development’ as we measure it is contributing to an ‘existential deficit’ that is affecting the health and wellbeing of people, rich and poor alike, and which jeopardizes their collective future. This ‘psychosocial dynamics’ perspective is largely absent from the political, and even scientific, debate about progress (Eckersley 2009, in press).

Furthermore, in reinforcing the impression given by other dominant indicators that Western liberal democracies represent the leading edge of progress, the best model of development, SWB measures work against achieving the goal of sustainability, humanity’s greatest challenge (Eckersley 2009, 2010, in press). In contrast, the ‘psychosocial dynamics’ view underscores the need for profound change for social, as well as environmental, reasons.

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