

Wellbeing Policy

An Overview

Dan Weijers and Aaron Jarden

Introduction¹

Wellbeing – or the prudential good life – refers to how well someone’s life is going *for him or her* (Crisp, 2014). Increasingly, awareness of the limitations of traditional economic indicators has led researchers to call for scientific measures of wellbeing to augment traditional measures (Diener et al., 2009; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Layard, 2005). The main problem with measures of per capita production, income and wealth is that they do not attribute direct value to many factors widely viewed as essential to high wellbeing, including relationships, health and happiness (Helliwell, 2006). In light of this problem and the attendant research, national governments and multinational organisations are investigating new measures of wellbeing to inform policy making (Diener, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Over the last decade, many of these new measures have been incorporated into various policymaking processes (see Diener et al., 2009). Within this movement toward new measures of wellbeing, some researchers are calling for the importance of mental health to be recognized by including various measures of mental health in any collection of key policy outcomes (e.g. Bok, 2010; Layard, 2005; Layard and Clark, 2014).

To pave the way for a focus on wellbeing policy in the context of mental health and recovery specifically (e.g. see Jarden, Jarden & Oades, this volume), this chapter briefly reviews the history of this debate, the current challenges of using measures of wellbeing and mental health for policy making, and some of the possibilities for meeting these challenges. We conclude that, with public backing, it would be appropriate for governments to measure mental health and wellbeing, and for the resultant data to inform policy making generally, and specifically as it relates to mental health.

Why Measure Wellbeing, Mental Health, and Recovery?

The limits of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) have been discussed by economists and many others for quite some time (Diener et al., 2009). Economic historians would point out that most of these perceived limitations are caused by the more recent use of these measures as general gauges of societal progress, rather than as a tool to assess the rate of economic growth (England, 1998). The limitations of GDP and

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GNP as general measures of progress were perhaps most passionately espoused by Robert F. Kennedy in his speech at the University of Kansas in 1968:

Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year, but that Gross National Product – if we judge the United States of America by that – that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts ... the television programs, which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.

(Kennedy, 1968)

The message was clear; there are many things that we value highly that are not captured by GDP and GNP. In response to this and other shortcomings of the existing economic indicators, researchers, national statisticians, and several nongovernmental organisations began to investigate and measure other policy goals, including human, social, and environmental capital (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003). In addition to broadening and refining the existing range of economic measures, these initiatives led to the collection of data related to individual wellbeing, quality of life, and happiness (Michalos, 2011). Academics from several disciplines and various countries, and some civil servants, have been increasingly pushing for these new measures of wellbeing to play more important roles in policy making (e.g. Bok, 2010; Layard, 2005; Stoll et al., 2012). Over the last few years, politicians have also become engaged. For example, in 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy chartered the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. The Commission, headed by Nobel-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, advised that their report

... is addressed, first of all, to political leaders. In this time of crises, when new political narratives are necessary to identify where our societies should go, the report advocates a shift of emphasis from a “production-oriented” measurement system to one focused on the well-being of current and future generations, in other words, toward broader measures of social progress.

(Stiglitz et al., 2009, p. 10)

Shortly afterward the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced the investigation and subsequent measurement of wellbeing by the British government:

[F]rom April next year, we’ll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.

(Cameron, 2010)

However, it may yet transpire that supranational organisations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), may end up leading the way in promoting the use of broader measures of wellbeing in policy making. For example, in April 2012, the UN General Assembly held a high-level meeting in New York on Happiness and Wellbeing: Defining a New Economic Paradigm. Importantly, the

agenda for this meeting included the use of measures of subjective wellbeing (for which individuals are asked to report on how well they think their lives are going). Indeed, the *World Happiness Report*, which was commissioned for the meeting, contained a chapter on “The state of world happiness” that relies exclusively on research using measures of subjective wellbeing because “they capture best how people rate the quality of their lives” (Helliwell and Wang, 2012, p.11).

The assessment of subjective wellbeing is probably the most contentious issue in the wider debate about the new measures of societal progress. For example, Cameron’s announcement that the UK government would begin collecting data on subjective wellbeing received mixed reviews (Cohen, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Vaillant, 2011). However, even major traditional economic organisations are beginning to stress the importance of subjective wellbeing. For example, the OECD (2013) has identified measures of subjective wellbeing (e.g. self-reported overall satisfaction with life) as essential for a complete understanding of wellbeing.

Lord Richard Layard, one of the most prominent proponents of the use of measures of subjective wellbeing, recommended that “quality of life, as people experience it, ought to be a key measure of progress and a central objective for any government” (Layard, 2011). Positions similar to Layard’s are held by individuals such as Derek Bok (2010), Ed Diener (2011), and Bruno Frey (2008). Layard has argued that measures of subjective wellbeing should be the main yardstick for public policy because happiness is the most important goal in life for most of us (Layard, 2005). Happiness is “what people want for their children and for their fellow citizens” and thereby “the greatest happiness of all” deserves to be the ultimate goal of governments and policy makers (Layard, 2005, pp. 124–125). Layard understands happiness as meaning “feeling good – enjoying life and wanting the feeling to be maintained” (2005, p. 12) and believes that the emerging field of wellbeing science has come far enough to accurately measure this kind of happiness using subjective survey questions. Thus, according to Layard, we should be using data from subjective survey measures of happiness and wellbeing to inform policy making. However, the use of subjective measures of happiness and wellbeing as the only or ultimate criterion to assess specific policies or progress in general has been criticised by philosophers and economists on many grounds (e.g. Diener and Scollon, 2003; Frey and Stutzer, 2007).

In addition, several scholars have argued that happiness is understood differently by different individuals and in different cultures (Joshano, 2014; Thin, 2012), and also that happiness is not always viewed as positive (Joshano and Weijers, 2014). However, while several researchers have concerns about happiness being the supreme aim of public policy, or even *an* aim of policy at all in some cultures, happiness as an aim of public policy in Western cultures seems to be fairly well supported (e.g. Bok, 2010; Diener, 2006, 2011; Diener and Scollon, 2003; Frey, 2008; Frey and Stutzer, 2007). If the citizenry of a democratic state demand that its government include subjective wellbeing as one of its overarching goals, then there is reason for policy makers to investigate measuring happiness and other subjective reports of the good life, and then use the resulting data as one of a set of guides for public policy. While citizens demanding that their government measure their subjective wellbeing might seem unlikely, a 2005 BBC opinion poll, which asked whether the government’s main objective should be the “greatest happiness” or the “greatest wealth,” returned a clear verdict, with 81% reporting that happiness should be the main goal (Easton, 2006). This result resembles a poll taken on *The Economist’s* website in 2011 during a debate between Richard Layard and Paul Ormerod, in which the motion “new measures of economic and social progress are needed for the 21st-century economy” (using happiness

science to inform policy making was the focus of the debate) received 83% of the support of the online audience. If these results are representative of popular opinion, then, in democracies at least, the practicality of measuring happiness for policy making should be investigated. Furthermore, since happiness is usually understood as being a subjective state (Layard, 2005), the practicality and processes of measuring subjective wellbeing for policy making should be investigated.

A closer look at the more detailed works by the researchers discussed above reveals a near-uniform preference for focusing initial subjective-wellbeing-related policy interventions on those with the worst subjective wellbeing. In most cases, the general argument in favour of focusing on those already worst off is that the gains are more easily achievable, and that it seems inhumane to help fairly happy people become very happy when others are suffering (Bok, 2010; Layard, 2005; Layard and Clark, 2014). Layard and Clark (2014) detail the great disparity in how much the UK government spends on physical health care compared with mental health care. They make a convincing case for modest increases in mental health spending making a big difference in the quality of life of thousands of unhappy people. In particular, they argue that getting the right help to people with mental illnesses could enable them to recover and live much more fulfilling lives and be more productive members of society. Thus policies targeted at mental health and recovery initiatives more than pay for themselves when broader range policy goals are considered.

An Overview of Measuring Subjective Wellbeing, Mental Health and Recovery

Whether the use of measures of mental health and happiness for policy making should be pursued depends not only on how important mental health and happiness are to people, but also on whether they can be efficiently and accurately measured. Of all the new methods for measuring happiness, only survey questions are currently practical on scales large enough to be useful for public policy. For example, survey questions asking for respondents' judgments about how happy or satisfied they are with their lives can be quickly and cheaply disseminated via online survey technology. Furthermore, the use of online surveys enables respondents' answers to be formatted into usable data quickly. In contrast, collecting wellbeing data with behavioral measures, such as expert observations, tracking devices, or neuroimaging techniques, is likely to be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. It is also unclear if any of these more objective measures are better at capturing how happy people are than simply asking them (Layard, 2005).

Subjective measures of wellbeing can be global or domain-specific. Global measures aim to assess respondents' judgments of their lives as a whole, while domain-specific measures target aspects of respondents' lives, such as their work lives, family lives, health, or finances. Although domain-specific measures have their uses (see Huppert et al., 2009), the focus in this chapter is on global measures because they provide a better approximation to the terms 'happiness' and 'wellbeing' as they are normally understood, and also usefully generalize across various states of mental health by way of individuals' subjective experience.

There are a wide range of global subjective wellbeing questions (Diener, 2009), but most are subtle variants of general questions about happiness or satisfaction with life. For example, the United States' General Social Survey asks, "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006, p. 6). The World Values Survey asks, "All things considered,

how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” and uses a response scale ranging from “1 (not at all satisfied)” to “10 (very satisfied)” (Ingleheart et al., 2008). The subtle variations on these questions usually amount to changing the number of available points on the response scale, or slightly adjusting the wording of the question (e.g. “in general,” “all things considered”). For example, the World Values Survey also asks the following question about happiness: “Taking all things together, would you say you are ... Very happy ... Rather happy ... Not very happy ... Not at all happy” using a four-point response scale.

Global subjective wellbeing questions elicit responses that are biased by aspects such as contextual factors, the specific wording of questions, the order and type of preceding questions, and respondents’ current moods (see OECD, 2013). Experiments have shown that contextual factors, such as the weather (Schwarz and Clore, 1983) or unexpectedly finding a dime (Schwarz, 1987), significantly affect how satisfied participants reported being with their lives. Experiments on the variability of self-reported satisfaction with life within individuals have demonstrated that people’s reported satisfaction with life as a whole can change over a period of a few weeks (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; OECD, 2013).

However, large representative samples and careful psychometric survey creation can avoid or mitigate these issues. Indeed, many of these potential biases can be avoided because they are random biases, which tend to affect different people at different times. Therefore, by conducting surveys on large representative samples (e.g. $n = 10,000+$: The Sovereign New Zealand Wellbeing Index, Jarden et al., 2013), the impact of random bias tends to cancel itself out (the law of averages) and is thereby considerably reduced. In this way, sampling can eliminate the potential bias associated with personal variations in mood and localized variation in important events (e.g. sports teams winning or variations in the weather). The effects of recent events and participants’ current moods can also be reduced by using a battery of questions about satisfaction with life, such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), instead of just one question (Lucas et al., 1996). To prevent the small but robust effects that specific questions have on subsequent responses to the more global questions, researchers usually put global questions first on their surveys (Schimmack and Oishi, 2005). Measures that span both mental health and wellbeing, such as the Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (Keyes, 2005) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Tennant, Hiller, Fishwick, Platt, Joseph, Weich, et al., 2007), have also been developed.

Challenges in Using Measures of Subjective Wellbeing to Inform Policy Making

Many criticisms have been leveled at the use of wellbeing science to inform policy. Three of the most pertinent criticisms will be briefly discussed here: that survey measures of happiness and wellbeing are too insensitive to be useful, that we cannot know what measures of happiness and wellbeing are really measuring, and that the wrong kind of happiness and wellbeing is being measured.

Are Happiness and Wellbeing Scales Insensitive?

Johns and Ormerod (2008) claim that time series happiness data are insensitive. Put simply, if time series happiness data are insensitive, then the happiness scores will not change enough in response to environmental changes for us to be 95% confident that the small changes in the happiness scores are not simply a product of chance. While insensitivity is a problem

for many measures of happiness, it is not an insurmountable one. The argument for the insensitivity of time series happiness data that Johns and Ormerod put forward is based on a discussion of one measure of happiness with a three-point response scale. This particular selection is somewhat misleading because most recent and contemporary happiness questions have larger response scales. Indeed, many of the subjective wellbeing scales currently in use have ten or eleven response options – for example, the life satisfaction question from the World Values Survey (question V22), the wellbeing questions used in the Gallup World Poll (Gallup Inc., 2008), or the questions in Work on Wellbeing (Work on Wellbeing, 2015). Moreover, as the OECD report and guidelines (OECD, 2013) indicate, the trend is to larger and more discriminant response scales (e.g., the OECD recommends that national statistical offices use 0–10 scales, with 0 representing an absence of the construct measured rather than the opposite of the construct – allowing even further discrimination of variables, and thus increased sensitivity). Even if there were not a trend toward more discriminant scales, researchers have routinely discovered statistically significant changes in time series happiness data even over short periods of time, and even in Johns and Ormerod's home nation of the United Kingdom (e.g. Ingleheart et al., 2008).

Therefore, although worries about the insensitivity of happiness measures are not completely unfounded, they do not provide a good reason to avoid using time series happiness data to guide policy. Indeed, many time series happiness studies can be useful for policy making in several ways (Frey, 2008). For example, careful comparison of survey data from similar nations, or other groups, where policy change has occurred in some groups but not others, can help to evaluate the effects of policy change on reported wellbeing (Turton, 2009).

Do Measures of Happiness and Wellbeing Really Assess Happiness and Wellbeing?

There are currently a number of different methods that are claimed to be measures of happiness and wellbeing (Lopez and Snyder, 2003). These include brain scans (neuroimaging), daily reports of feelings, the opinions of participants' friends or colleagues, the opinion of an expert, the amount of time participants smile and, most commonly, survey questions (Lopez and Snyder, 2003; Weijers, 2010). Importantly, there are a range of survey questions about happiness and wellbeing, many of which are worded very differently. Some ask about positive and negative feelings, satisfaction with life, whether you would change anything about your life and, of course, happiness. The results of these diverse survey measures tend to correlate with one another and the nonsubjective measures just mentioned (Layard 2005). Kroll (2010), Layard (2005), and Bok (2010) all argue that these correlations should encourage us to have faith in the validity of subjective measures of wellbeing. Indeed, the high significance of these correlations does provide good evidence that answers to survey questions about happiness and wellbeing are related to the relevant nonsubjective assessments. However, since the correlations are also never close to being large, we also have good evidence that the various measures are not assessing the same phenomenon (Weijers, 2010). So the most reasonable answer to the question heading this subsection is that measures of happiness and wellbeing really do assess happiness and wellbeing, but with each measure assessing a related but different conception of happiness and wellbeing. Simply being clear about which measures (and related conceptions) are being used pretty well resolves this problem for policy makers. However, this solution also highlights our next problem.

How Do We Know If We Are Measuring the Right Kind of Happiness and Wellbeing?

It is well known by happiness researchers that the various questions in wellbeing surveys are not tracking the same phenomena (Dodge et al., 2012). Indeed, many social scientists and philosophers recognize that the different kinds of questions used in subjective wellbeing surveys often endorse one particular theory of wellbeing (e.g. Feldman, 2010; McDowell, 2010). Do these differences matter if the measures are assessing something that is obviously good? We suggest that for policy-relevant research, yes, they do (or at least they may, depending on the details).

What if findings based on different measures of wellbeing imply different policies? This is not just a theoretical problem, as many seemingly contradictory results from wellbeing science show. For example, Diener et al. (2010) provided evidence that the more a measure of subjective wellbeing asks about the respondents' emotional lives, and the less it encourages them to engage in cognitive deliberation about how satisfied they are with their lives compared with what they might have been, the smaller and less significant the relationship between increases in income and increases in subjective wellbeing becomes. So, in this case, the choice of a subjective wellbeing measure might affect policy decisions about income redistribution.

How ought the problem of apparently contradictory findings from the science of wellbeing to be resolved? First, researchers should avoid generalizing findings from different measures of wellbeing, unless those questions have been shown to track the same phenomena in the same circumstances in other studies. Second, policy makers should always refer to the original research papers, and even the survey questions themselves, if the researchers have not made the phenomena obvious (Weijers, 2010). Having found that the contradictory wellbeing science findings are based on the use of different measures of wellbeing, what should a policy maker do? Discovery of such a conflict illuminates the fundamental problem policy makers intent on using wellbeing science face, which is, "Which question or questions about subjective wellbeing are the most appropriate basis for policy making?"

Policy makers should not expect to have to answer this question by themselves. Philosophers have debated the merits of various theories of wellbeing for at least two thousand years (Weijers, 2010), and social scientists have been debating which measures of wellbeing are the most valid, reliable, and representative of the best philosophical theories of wellbeing (Huppert et al., 2009; McDowell, 2010). Unfortunately, there is still no agreement between academics on which question about subjective wellbeing is the most appropriate basis for policy making. However, there are many candidates whose advantages and disadvantages have been discussed at length (e.g. Helliwell and Wang, 2012; Huppert et al., 2009), and new proposals about how to resolve this issue continue to emerge (Forgeard et al., 2011; Taylor, 2015). This academic knowledge needs to be discussed widely to engender public debate about what makes people's lives go well for them and the proper aims of government. A populace that is informed about what makes citizens' lives go well for them will be able to exercise its democratic rights to lobby (and perhaps vote) for its members' preferred conception of wellbeing (Weijers, 2010). When this occurs, policy makers can work with social scientists to ensure that appropriate measures of wellbeing are used to guide public policy. This approach will allow happiness researchers to be confident that they are producing findings that are relevant for policy making, and policy makers to benefit fully from happiness science.

These potential problems just discussed for subjective measures of happiness and well-being apply equally to general measures of mental health. If subjective measures of mental health are not sensitive enough to external factors, or if they do not capture the elements that are widely viewed as essential to mental health, then they will not be useful to policy makers. However, the solutions discussed above also apply in equal measure. Perhaps most importantly, researchers have demonstrated how a subjective wellbeing approach can create policy-friendly information (Fujiwara and Campbell, 2011), including information on mental health issues (Fujiwara and Dolan, 2014).

What Roles Should Mental Health, Happiness, and Wellbeing Play in Policy Making?

In any democratic society, citizens should decide what conceptions of mental health, happiness, or wellbeing are important and the extent of the roles any such conceptions should play in policy making. In order to educate citizens and encourage effective evidence-based policy making, academics and top-level civil servants need to better clarify the various conceptions of mental health, happiness, and wellbeing and whether we can accurately and efficiently measure them. After these issues have been clarified, the circumstances and policies that affect mental health, happiness, or wellbeing (as defined in each case) should be investigated to help better understand where each concept fits in the economic, political, and cultural landscape and also to promote public debate on the relevant merits of certain kinds of happiness and mental health. Initial steps have been taken to provide sketches of what public policies based on happiness research might look like at the local (Rablen, 2012), national (Bok, 2010; Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2006; Dolan and White, 2007) and international levels (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2006), but specific and thoroughly justified recommendations are only just beginning to emerge. Philosophers, psychologists, economists, statisticians, political scientists, and policy makers should work together collaboratively on this important endeavor in order to pool their collective expertise and progress most effectively. The conference series “Wellbeing and Public Policy” by Morrison, Weijers and Jarden (Morrison and Weijers, 2012), which began in 2012, is one such collaborative effort.

Mental health, happiness, and wellbeing are clearly important values. However, the scope and depth of the roles of these values in public policy are ultimately in the hands of governments and citizens around the world. One of the goals of this book is to provide rigorous and contemporary scientific findings about what we can and might be able to do to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of various subgroups and populations. We hope that this information will be used to inform future policies that enhance people’s mental health and wellbeing.

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