

International Differences in Well-Being

Edited by Ed Diener, John F. Helliwell, and Daniel Kahneman

Oxford University Press, 2010

ISBN 978-0-19-973273-9

Hardcover, US\$55.00, 497 pp.

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Why do reported levels of well-being differ (or not) across countries? The question is important for two reasons. Most obviously, we can congratulate those psychologists who have in recent decades moved away from a focus on mental problems toward exploring what it is that makes people feel good. If we can identify with some confidence the societal factors that encourage a sense of well-being then we might target public policy on those factors. And that insight leads to the second reason. Studies of well-being have often suggested that many targets of public policy—most notably, economic growth itself—have little or no impact on measures of well-being. If those results were found to be robust we would need to question the value of a host of public policies.

This volume flows from a conference at Princeton that gathered an impressive interdisciplinary array of scholars interested in the international study of well-being. The individual chapters each display mastery of data and method, and of the key issues that have emerged in the field over the past decades. Yet the reader hoping for a strong consensus may be disappointed.

It is perhaps inevitable that a diverse group of scholars that have argued different points of view in the past will fail to agree on many things. It is noteworthy that conference participants spoke of issuing a “Princeton manifesto” but did not proceed to do so. The editors suggest two important areas of emerging consensus. The first involves recognition that there are competing measures of well-being, and that further research should strive to clarify how these relate to each other. Most centrally, the very preference for the word “well-being” rather than “happiness” (the second area of consensus) reflects a realization that measures of “life satisfaction” differ from measures of more transitory “mood.”

There is no concluding chapter that attempts to identify the sources of differing conclusions, much less attempt to resolve these. The nine-page editorial introduction largely summarizes each chapter in turn. The editors themselves conclude that life satisfaction is indeed positively correlated with levels of income, even across rich countries and over time, though measures of mood or emotion likely are not. Yet several contributors reach the opposite conclusion that economic growth in rich countries has no impact on well-being.

The most useful chapters may thus be those that attempt to comprehend why different researchers reach different conclusions. Graham, Chattopadhyay, and Picon note first that results prove very sensitive to which countries are included, which precise questions are asked, and which estimation techniques are employed. In particular the inclusion of troubled middle-income transition economies in regressions has a major impact on results. They then argue that the link between income and well-being is moderated by several other variables. Rapid dislocating growth may decrease well-being. Moderate growth may have negative effects on well-being if people expected more rapid growth. Changes in levels of inequality also may affect average measures of well-being. The implication of their research is that we need to include other variables in our analysis and recognize that measured levels of well-being may fluctuate a great deal over time in any country. Several other variables—including urbanization, corruption, social tolerance, and freedom of various types—are suggested in other chapters to be important. Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, and Huang suggest that having friends to count on—and living in a country where others have friends to count

on—has a greater effect on well-being than large increases in income. Indeed, several chapters argue that social and political variables affect well-being more than income.

Most of the studies draw upon data generated by the Gallup World Polls of 2005–6, 2007, and 2008 (and also the World Values Survey). One major question is whether respondents in different countries use different scales in evaluating their own levels of well-being. Conceivably, respondents evaluate themselves against their neighbors. If so then average scores in a country of miserable people might not differ from average scores in a country of ecstatic people. Kasptein, Smith, and van Soest explore the use of “vignettes:” respondents in the Netherlands and the United States were asked to evaluate the well-being of described characters (Fred is married with three kids, etc.). Their results suggest that respondents in the two countries do attribute quite similar levels of well-being to characters as described in these vignettes. Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, and Huang argue empirically that a mix of economic and social variables can explain cross-country differentials under the assumption that people in different countries do employ similar scales. Ruut Veenhoven asks whether the latest empirical research sheds light on the longstanding philosophical question of whether “happiness” is a human universal; he finds that all humans do appraise their lives in terms of a set of universal human desires. On the other hand, Shigehero Oishi argues that many studies have found that there are important cross-cultural differences in how questions about well-being are interpreted.

Several chapters address more narrow questions. Kahneman, Schkade, Fischler, Krueger, and Krilla ask why marriage appears to have only a transitory positive impact on well-being. They argue that concerns with life satisfaction dominate at the time of marriage. Over the longer term, though, the positive and negative effects on mood of marriage balance out. Ronald F. Inglehart looks at religion. Those who say God is important in their lives tend to have greater well-being in most countries. The notable exceptions are ex-Communist states where the least happy people seem to be turning to religion. Inglehart posits that any strong belief system can encourage well-being and indeed finds empirically that confirmed atheists share higher levels of well-being with the very religious. Importantly, he argues that we underestimate both the importance of economic growth and religion on well-being if we estimate these separately, since economic growth is associated with declining religiosity.

The last two chapters examine issues associated with work. Harter and Arora employ various measures of “job fit” and find that this is strongly associated with well-being. Andrew Clark finds that, at least in the OECD, there is a huge gap in well-being between the employed and unemployed. He also finds that measures of job satisfaction, falling before 1997, have rebounded since then. Harter and Arora find that the highest well-being is among those who like their jobs and work about 40 hours a week. Both chapters appreciate that further research is necessary, but both suspect that work provides an important sense of meaning in one’s life.

Scholars interested in exploring the links between population variables and happiness will find in this volume a useful overview of the theoretical and methodological issues that dominate the field. And they should be encouraged by the fact that scholars of well-being have moved beyond a narrow focus on income, and are increasing the range of variables engaged.

While exploring interactions among a wider set of variables is a very promising line of research, researchers need also to delve more deeply into the broad variables already under investigation (as they are doing with measures of well-being itself). None of the authors try to decompose economic growth. Yet surely it is possible that better transport, health, and education affect well-being more than increases in conspicuous consumption? And what of pollution or congestion? Surely the economic growth associated with these is less likely to make people feel better about their lives. And thus, both the production mix and consumption mix associated with economic growth may have a huge impact on well-being. If so, we would be encouraged to stop focusing upon GDP as a policy goal, but rather on particular elements of GDP.

The temptation to doubt that we will ever agree on the sources of human well-being should be avoided. More likely there are elements of economic growth, political liberalization, and cultural change that exert positive effects on well-being and others that exert negative effects. And the picture is further complicated by the complex interactions among these variables. We must thus both look more deeply and more broadly for answers. Yet by doing so we may still aspire to inform public policy in a fundamental manner.