

What's special about happiness as a social indicator?

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The splendidly detailed survey by Land and Michalos (2017) is full of precious information otherwise likely to have remained buried. For example, who would have guessed that the social indicators movement in the United States was kick-started by NASA looking for a way of measuring the secondary benefits of moon-landings? The authors have been productively engaged in the field for essentially the whole 50 years covered by their survey, and are owed a real debt of gratitude for their sustained leadership. They have both been involved in research, organizational innovation, and development of new journals so effectively as to earn thanks from all of us who search for better ways to evaluate and improve the quality of life at the local, national and global levels.

Perhaps because Land and Michalos have been so continuously involved in the development of social indicators and quality of life studies, they remain truer to its initial structure than others who have been attracted into the field more recently. This is especially true in my case, as I entered the field only about 20 years ago, drawn in by what I saw to be the possibilities for using subjective well-being data to reform the ways in which social progress is measured, understood, and fostered.

What are the main differences between what they and I see to be the best ways of measuring social progress? First, and most fundamentally, they remain committed to the primary use of multi-dimensional indexes constructed by experts. In contrast, I see the appeal and usefulness of subjective well-being data, and especially life evaluations, as being due to their primary nature – as unvarnished measures of what people actually think about the quality of their lives. When we were explaining in the *World Happiness Report 2015* why we had no hesitation in using people's own life evaluations instead of some constructed index of social and economic indicators, here are the four main reasons we offered:

“First, we attach fundamental importance to the evaluations that people make of their own lives. This gives them a reality and power that no expert-constructed index could ever have. For a report that strives for objectivity, it is very important that the rankings depend entirely on the basic data collected from population-based samples of individuals, and not at all on what we think might or should influence the quality of their lives. Thus the average scores simply reflect what individual respondents report to the Gallup World Poll surveyors. The Report editors have no power to influence the averages beyond the choice of the number of survey years to use to establish sufficiently large samples.

Second, the fact that life evaluations represent primary new knowledge about the value people attach to their lives means we can use the data as a basis for research designed to show what helps to support better lives.

Third, the fact that our data come from population-based samples in each country means that we can calculate and present confidence regions about our estimates, thus providing a way to see if the rankings are based on differences big enough, or not, to be statistically meaningful. If a number of adjacent ranked countries all have values well within the sampling range of variance, then it can be concluded that they deserve to be treated as having statistically equivalent average life evaluations.

Fourth, all of the alternative indexes depend importantly, but to an unknown extent, on the index-makers' opinions about what is important. This uncertainty makes it hard to treat such an index as an overall measure of well-being or even to work out the extent to which variations in individual components are affecting overall scores. Even where this decomposition is done, there is no way of establishing its validity, since the index itself is just the sum of its parts, and not an independent measure of well-being.

Finally, we note in passing that data users themselves, when given a chance, attach more weight to people's own judgments of their lives than to any other well-being indicator. This is shown in part by the fact that when the OECD invited users to choose their own weights to attach to the various sub-indicators of the Better Life Index, they found that in every country users typically attached high importance to life evaluations and health relative to other possibilities offered on the dashboard.” (Helliwell, Huang & Wang 2015, 19-20)

The second difference between the Land/Michalos analysis and ours is that for them there is nothing very special about subjective well-being as a social indicator, while for us it is paramount. While Land and Michalos document recent growth in the general social indicators field, Barrington-Leigh and Escande (2017) show that the largest part of recent growth has involved measures of subjective well-being.

Third, we attach more importance than does the Land/Michalos survey to developments within psychology, and especially positive psychology. These developments have made it natural for researchers to treat positive and negative affect quite separately, and to focus more deliberately on their creation and consequences for a variety of measures of subsequent life success, ranging from good health to higher life evaluations. This has in turn encouraged a change of policy focus away from the repair mode – wait until something goes wrong and then try to fix it – to a more creative mode intended from the outset to enable people everywhere to build better lives for each other and for their communities.

Fourth, there is possibly a range of differences between them and us about how various measures of subjective well-being are related to one another. Clarifying these differences is more important for us than for them, given the central importance we attach to life evaluations. For them, given the more peripheral and optional nature of subjective well-being variables, the consequences of ambiguity are much less. Evidence continues to accumulate showing that that life evaluations, positive affect and negative affect, long thought to capture different aspects of well-being (Diener et al 1999) are now seen to do

so in a consistent manner, so much so as to be used as indicators of national progress (Diener 2000). Of these three ways of measuring subjective well-being, life evaluations provide the most encompassing indicator of the quality of life. The three most common forms of life evaluation are life satisfaction questions of the sort advocated by the OECD (2013), questions asking how happy people are with their lives as a whole, and the Cantril ladder question used in the Gallup World Poll, wherein people are asked to think of their lives as a ladder, with the worst possible life for them as a 0 and the best as a 10. Where these different life evaluation questions have been asked of the same respondents in the same survey (SWL and the Cantril ladder in one year of the Gallup World Poll, and SWL and happy with life regularly in the European Social Surveys) they tell structurally equivalent stories about the correlates of a good life, even though the means and shapes of the distributions of the answers differ among the questions.

Questions asking about emotions usually relate to a particular time, and emotions are found to vary considerably by time of day and time of week. Although positive and negative emotions are less useful as overall measures of the quality of life, they are important in several other key ways. First, their short-term nature makes them natural to use as outcome variables in experimental studies. Second, the frequency of a number of positive and negative emotions (especially positive emotions, e.g. Cohen and Pressman 2006) has been found to predict a number of future health outcomes, including mortality from both sickness and suicide. Third, positive emotions have been found to contribute directly to life evaluations, much as Aristotle predicted, and supported by research (Fredrickson 2004) showing that positive emotions encourage individuals to broaden their networks and activities in ways that build their overall satisfaction with life. Thus at the aggregate level, the frequency of positive emotions yesterday adds significantly to structural equations explaining life evaluations, while the presence or absence of negative emotions has no such effect (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2016, Table 2.1, column 4).

Some have argued that it is misleading to use 'happiness' as a generic term to cover subjective well-being more generally. While 'subjective well-being' is more precise, it simply does not have the convening power of 'happiness'. The main linguistic argument for using happiness in a broader generic role is that happiness plays two important roles within the science of well-being, appearing once as a prototypical positive emotion and again as part of a cognitive life evaluation question. This double use has sometimes been used to argue that there is no coherent structure to happiness responses. The converse argument made in the World Happiness Reports is that this double usage helps to justify using happiness in a generic role, as long as the alternative meanings are clearly understood and credibly related. Evidence from a growing number of large scale surveys shows that the answers to questions asking about the emotion of happiness differ from answers to judgmental questions asking about a person's happiness with life as a whole in exactly the ways that theory would suggest. Answers to questions about the emotion of happiness relate well to what is happening at the moment. Evaluative answers, in response to questions about life as a whole, are supported by positive emotions, as noted above, but also driven much more, than are answers to questions about emotions, by a variety of life circumstances, including income, health and social trust.

Finally, in answer to the question posed in the title of this comment, I would argue that measures of subjective well-being, and especially life evaluations, or judgments by individuals about how happy they are with their lives as a whole, can rightly be treated as encompassing social indicators. Only life evaluations, among all the variety of social indicators considered in the Land/Michalos survey, meet the two primary tests for an encompassing measure. First, they have good claims to be themselves global assessments of the quality of life, without any further construction or manipulation. Second, since they are primary measures and also encompassing in their scope, they provide the research base for answering the fundamental questions about the quality of life – what does tend to lead to a better life, as seen by those doing the living? To answer these questions of course requires the design and measurement of precisely those social indicators that have been the focus of the past fifty years of social indicators research.

Measures of subjective well-being, and especially life evaluations, or judgments about how happy people are with their lives as a whole, are thus no threat to social indicators research seen more broadly. Indeed, they enrich and empower this research by both requiring the design and collection of other social indicators and providing a coherent empirical and theoretical framework within which their relative importance can be established.

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