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# The Remarkable Changes in the Science of Subjective Well-Being

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## Abstract

The science of subjective well-being (SWB) has grown dramatically in the last three decades, moving beyond the early cross-sectional surveys of the demographic correlates of SWB. Stronger methods are frequently used to study a broader set of psychological phenomena, such as the effects on SWB of adaptation, culture, personality, and genetics. One important new research finding is that SWB has beneficial effects on health and longevity, social relationships, and productivity. National accounts of SWB are being created to provide information to policy makers about the psychological well-being of citizens. The SWB accounts represent an opportunity for psychologists to demonstrate the positive effects their interventions can produce in societies.

## Keywords

subjective well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, positive affect, well-being

I entered the field of subjective well-being (SWB) in 1981. That year, there were 131 publications related to it; in 2012, there were about 12,000. In 1981, the studies were primarily descriptive and cross-sectional, and they focused on the demographic correlates of SWB such as age, income, sex, and education. In 2012, there were more longitudinal studies, as well as broadly representative samples such as the Gallup World Poll. SWB now is measured not only with self-report scales, but also through experience sampling, biological measures, and informant reports. Furthermore, the content of the studies now is much more comprehensive, including topics such as personality, culture and psychological processes such as social comparison. Thus, the questions asked about SWB have become more wide ranging, and the methodologies used by researchers have allowed firmer conclusions to be drawn. For a broader view of the field, as well as support for the findings presented in this article, the three volumes of my collected works can be consulted (2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

## Types of SWB

I suggested (Diener, 1984) that there are three separable major components of SWB: life satisfaction, positive experiences, and negative experiences. Since then, accumulated evidence indicates that these major components are independent and that they are influenced by different

causes. For instance, extraversion is associated with positive experience but is much less related to negative experiences. Societal income is much more strongly related to life satisfaction than it is to lower negative affect.

## Causes and Correlates of SWB

Both internal (top-down) and external (bottom-up) factors have been shown to influence SWB. For an example of top-down effects, we found that extraversion was associated with positive experiences in many cultures. Furthermore, heritability estimates for SWB are significant (e.g., Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), and evidence links genes to SWB as well (De Neve, 2011). Thus, personality and genetic factors can influence levels of SWB.

Income is a bottom-up influence that has been heavily studied, and debates continue about the effects of income and wealth on well-being. There is a very strong association between the average income in nations and the average SWB in them, but there are weaker and less reliable correlations within nations between income and SWB. Furthermore, rising income is not inevitably accompanied by increasing SWB (Diener, Tay, & Oishi, 2013).

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These inconsistencies occur because the relation of income and SWB is not a simple stimulus–response relation in which income satisfies needs, which in turn raises SWB. Instead, there are many mediating and moderating psychological factors.

People's aspirations might rise faster than their incomes, leaving them unhappy despite rising income. People across the globe seem now to base their income aspirations on the lifestyle in the wealthiest societies (Becchetti, Castriota, & Giachin, 2010). Rather than comparing themselves to others in close proximity, as Festinger's theory proposed, people may now compare their lifestyles with those that they see in the mass media. People no longer want merely to keep up with the Joneses—they want to match lifestyles in the richest nations in the world. The troubling aspect of this finding is that economic growth will not necessarily create higher SWB, and people may feel frustrated even though their incomes are rising.

Other factors also complicate the income and SWB relation. For example, how people earn their income, how they spend their money, how strongly they esteem money (materialism) versus other values, and their optimism about the future can all influence the association. Furthermore, income may affect life satisfaction more than it influences positive affect (e.g., Diener, Kahneman, Tov, & Arora, 2010). Finally, there is the complicating factor that high SWB at least in some circumstances may lead to higher income rather than being caused by it.

## Outcomes of SWB

Longitudinal studies led us to conclude that feeling happy is not just a pleasant outcome, it also can be a predictor and cause of future behavior. The influence that high SWB exerts often appears to be beneficial (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013). People who feel satisfied and experience positive feelings most of the time act differently from those who are unhappy, and they enjoy better health as well (Diener & Chan, 2011; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Thus, SWB can be seen as a cause of outcomes and not merely as an outcome of felicitous circumstances. For example, past cross-sectional research concluded that married people are happier. However, at least part of this association is due to the fact that happy people are more likely to get married and stay married. In accord with the experimental findings that people put into a good mood are more altruistic, happy people give more money to charity and are more likely to donate blood. Happy people like other people more on average, and in turn are generally more liked by others.

Earlier, I suggested that income had a bottom-up effect on SWB. However, our findings, which have been

replicated a number of times, show that people high in SWB later earn higher incomes, even after we controlled for initial demographic characteristics. We have also found that high SWB predicts a lower likelihood of future unemployment. The longitudinal findings provide a warning that correlation does not mean causation in this field, because happy people may be more likely to marry, earn more, and so forth, without marriage and income necessarily causing long-term changes in SWB.

It is now known that high SWB can lead to better health and longevity (rather than being caused by them), to better social relationships, and to greater work productivity (e.g., Edmans, 2012; Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010). SWB likely exerts a causal role in good health and does not just follow from it. Longitudinal studies reveal that young happy people are likely to remain healthier and live longer, even after controlling for factors such as income. Furthermore, experimental studies show that positive feelings can have desirable physiological effects, and negative feelings can have undesirable ones. Quasi-experimental studies indicate that there can be an uptick in deaths arising from stress due to disasters. The factors that mediate the relation between high SWB and better health and longevity—for example, a stronger immune system and better health behaviors such as exercising—are also being pinpointed. The U.S. counties with higher life satisfaction have greater life expectancies (Lawless & Lucas, 2011) and lower levels of mortality from heart disease, homicide, liver disease, diabetes, and cancer.

## Societal and Cultural Differences in SWB

It appears that there are universal causes of SWB across the globe, such as having basic needs met and experiencing supportive social relationships. Certainly, there are broad baseline differences in the SWB of societies due to factors such as the fulfillment of basic needs, societal trust, and lack of corruption, but there also appear to be differences across cultures in some of the causes of SWB (Tov & Diener, 2007). For example, self-esteem and emotional feelings correlate more strongly with life satisfaction in individualistic cultures than they do in collectivistic cultures. In addition, we have found that there are cultural congruence effects—that is, people are happier if they have characteristics that are consistent with cultural norms. For example, religious people are much happier than nonreligious people in very religious societies, but there is little difference between the two groups in less religious societies such as Sweden, where nonreligious people have a slight advantage in SWB. Similarly, extraverts tend to be only slightly happier than introverts in

more introverted societies, but they are significantly happier in extroverted societies.

Cultures influence what individuals consider to be most important to life satisfaction. For instance, people in individualistic societies pay more attention to their emotions when making life satisfaction judgments, due to the fact that personal emotions are considered to be a core component of individual identity. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures pay more attention to their social relationships and whether others view their lives as successful. In sum, people tend to have higher SWB if they have characteristics in accord with their societal norms and values. Thus, culture influences not only people's levels of SWB, but the factors that most affect it.

### National Accounts of SWB

Measures of SWB broadly mirror the quality of life in societies beyond economic factors and thus reflect social capital, a clean environment, and other variables not fully captured by economic indicators (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, high SWB is desirable in a society because people experiencing it tend to be better citizens and healthier. Thus, I suggested in 2000 that societies create national accounts of SWB to parallel economic accounts. Participating societies would regularly administer diverse measures of psychological well-being to large samples, allowing researchers to track which groups and regions are flourishing or floundering and why. This proposal has met with surprising success. For instance, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom announced in 2010 that policy makers would collect SWB data, and other nations are following suit. In 2013, the Organization of Economic Cooperation, which provides guidance to countries on the collection of national statistics, provided nations with guidelines for national accounts of SWB.

National accounts of SWB have two major purposes. First, they track a characteristic—high SWB—that is valued by people and produces desirable outcomes. Thus, like education or health, SWB should be monitored because citizens value it. Second, SWB can reflect other factors related to the quality of life in a society. Conditions such as clean air and low corruption correlate with higher SWB, and therefore national accounts of SWB reflect their influence. Societal factors such as social capital and green space also seem to affect SWB. Thus, national accounts of SWB will not only track a characteristic that is desirable in its own right, they will also provide a summary of diverse dimensions of quality of life in a society. The SWB measures complement economic and other social indicators—they do not replace them. Psychologists study many factors that influence SWB, such as discrimination, mental illness, childrearing, and rewarding work. Thus, the national accounts of SWB have the potential to reveal the benefits of psychological interventions to societies across the globe.

### Adaptation

The degree to which people adapt to conditions has been of intense interest in SWB studies since the Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman's (1978) classic article, in which they suggested that even conditions such as paraplegia or wealth from a lottery winning would not produce long-lasting changes in SWB. However, longitudinal research (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006) reveals that although people often react strongly to events and then return toward their initial baseline over time, they do not always fully adapt. For instance, people often do not completely adapt to certain aversive circumstances such as unemployment, and widows may require many years to adapt to the death of their spouse. People can be resilient and adapt, but the average person does not completely adapt to all conditions.

### Conclusions

SWB has become a vibrant area of research, with many exciting new research opportunities. For instances, researchers are exploring when higher income does and does not lead to higher SWB. They are also exploring whether interventions to increase SWB can be long lasting. In my laboratory, we are interested in determining how much SWB produces higher productivity or health and whether too much SWB—for example, too few negative feelings—can actually be detrimental. Although exciting gains have been made in our understanding of SWB, there is much more yet to be discovered.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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