WAYS TO MEASURE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Well-being is challenging to define, but it is even harder to measure. Generally, well-being measures can be classified into two broad categories: subjective and objective. Subjective well-being can be measured through certain observable personality traits of an individual. Subjective well-being involves psychological aspects such as confidence, perceptions, fulfilment, sense of belonging, and purpose. The objective well-being of an individual is assessed through economic, social, and spiritual aspects. The happiness index is a comprehensive tool to assess well-being, life satisfaction, and sustainability. The happiness index can also be used to measure quality of life.

Keywords: Subjective well-being, happiness index, standard, nonstandard methods to measure.

INTRODUCTION

Public policies, ideally, aim at improving the quality of life of the people. However, public policies can only deliver the best results if they are regularly monitored using reliable tools to measure the improvement they seek to provide. Generally, positive and negative impact of economic activities is not reflected/distinguished in GDP (Ovaska & Takashima,2006)[i]. Therefore, measuring happiness and well-being, both objective and subjective, becomes essential. People are the best judges of their happiness, and subjective well-being is measured by asking individuals a particular set of multiple-choice questions (Frey & Luechinger 2007)[ii].

Well-being is challenging to define, but it is even harder to measure. Generally, well-being measures can be classified into two broad categories: subjective and objective. Subjective well-being can be measured through certain observable personality traits of an individual. The objective well-being of an individual is assessed through economic, social, and spiritual aspects.

Subjective measures of well-being directly capture feelings or experience, assessing them through ordinal measures (McGillivray & Clarke 2006)[iii]. Subjective well-being involves psychological aspects such as confidence, perceptions, fulfilment, sense of belonging, and purpose. The first source of information, the hedonic degree of affect or emotional component, captures people's feelings, moods, and emotions and identifies the dimensions and determinants that can influence human well-being positively or adversely[iv]. Well-being is subjective to each individual. The intensity of inner feelings such as joy, happiness, worry, and stress makes a person happy or unhappy (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010)[v]. Because humans are conscious beings, they may subjectively evaluate their appreciation of life, referred to as "subjective well-being" or happiness. Happiness, in particular, might be described as general satisfaction with life or, as sociologist Veenhoven (1984)[vi] argues, as the degree to which an individual favourably views the overall quality of their existence. Similarly, Diener (2003)[vii] defines happiness as affective and cognitive assessments of people's lives. According to Veenhoven, people evaluate their appreciation for life using two types of information: affects and thoughts.

Quantifying happiness has always been challenging as its concept is multi-dimensional, and there is no universal method of measuring happiness. However, there are three hallmarks of happiness. Firstly, according to Camphell (1976)[viii], it is subjective; it resides with the experiences of individuals, which are not affected by health, wealth, and comfort. Secondly, it can be measured by including positive indices and reflects the mental state of an individual. Well-being can be measured using all domains/qualities of a person's life. This measure may cover a few weeks to the individual's entire life (Diener, 1984)[ix]. Thirdly, Veenhoven (2009)[x] suggested the meaning of happiness with four qualities of life: liveability, life ability, utility, and satisfaction. Hussien, (2010)[xi] found that satisfaction with life is a more appropriate definition of happiness since policymakers always try to improve the first two qualities.

The happiness index is a comprehensive tool to assess well-being, life satisfaction, and sustainability. The happiness index can also be used to measure quality of life (Musikanski, 2017)[xii]. The happiness index measures life satisfaction, a feeling of happiness, and various other domains of happiness: trust, social, support, psychological well-being, etc. (Happiness Alliance, 2014c)[xiii]. It has become a global issue after the Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan and the World Happiness Report of the UN (Bhattacharyya 2019)[xiv].

The concept of GNH was introduced by the king of Bhutan in 1972 as a tool to measure the happiness of its people. The United Nations adopted the happiness index as a tool to measure the well-being of people. United Nations passed a resolution, "Happiness towards a Holistic Approach to Development", in 2011, and happiness became a fundamental human goal.

In the current scenario, more importance is given to economic and social indicators to provide the feedback required for the proper functioning of any public policy. However, in the past, GDP and per capita income were commonly used indicators that did not effectively capture the trend of well-being and policies. Providing social and economic indicators will lead to better decision-making and the success of public policies. Hence, calculating subjective well-being and measuring happiness becomes one of the critical issues for any government to understand human behaviour (Osberg 2002)[xv].

2.2 MEASUREMENT OF HAPPINESS

When an individual judges their overall quality of life positively, it is defined as happiness. The way to measure happiness is to ask individuals to give their opinions regarding happiness. Since happiness is not tangible, measuring it and finding a reliable method is a significant challenge. There are many ways to measure the secrets of happiness. Various scientists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and economists have tried to measure happiness; significant differences can be seen in their approach. These different approaches lead to different perceptions and definitions of happiness.

2.2.1 Standard Tools for Measuring Happiness

I. **Survey Method:** It is a standard method of measuring happiness. In this method, all individuals have to answer the same set of questions with limited response options. This method is called the Primary Scale of Happiness (Ruut Veenhoven 2015)[xvi]. Two prominent survey methods are described below:

(a) The World Values Survey (WVS) is a global research project providing cross-country data on self-reported life satisfaction. It explores people's beliefs, how they change over time, and what is the social and political impact. These are the longest-time series of cross-country happiness covering almost 100 countries, including non-European nations.

(b) Eurobarometer: It has been measuring the attitudes of the European population for the past four decades. The survey is conducted twice a year. European countries utilize the Eurobarometer as a political instrument to promote and support European Integration. Eurobarometer uses reported life satisfaction, social spending, GDP growth, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, and inflation rate as its variables. Data on life satisfaction is collected as a part of a public opinion survey (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2013)[xvii].

Table 2.1 Survey method for evaluation of happiness

Survey	WVS	EUROBAROMETER
Question	Taking all things together, would you say you...	Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say you are...?
Response options	very happy quite happy not very happy not at all happy	Happy Fairly happy Not too happy

Source: Author's interpretation through literature

Table 2.1 shows the survey questions and response options for WVS and Eurobarometer.

II. **Ordinal level of measurement:** Happiness can be measured as a discrete or ordinal variable. That is, the ordinal values get numerical scales, which are then converted into code numbers. Gallup World Poll is a prominent example of an ordinal level of measurement as described below:

(a) Gallup World Poll: Cantril ladder measures happiness with the best possible life at 10, and the worst possible life at 0. The main life evaluation question asked in the poll is: "Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom represents your worst possible life. On which step of the ladder would you say you stand now?" (WHR, 2012)[xviii]

III. **Happiness research at the individual level:** In the individual level of happiness research, the researcher collects an individual's data at the micro level. Happiness is then converted on an index. The researcher links happiness and correlates the results of respondents separately and then compares them across gender, age, urban, and rural lines. Cross-tabulation is used to provide sufficient information. Then, these index numbers are used by various researchers in economics as they quantify happiness in a standard way. Some prominent methods of this approach are described below:

(a) The General Happiness Scale: This method was created in 1999 by Lyubomirsky and Lepper. The subjective happiness scale consists of 4 items on a 7-point Likert scale (Lyubomirsky, 1999)[xix].The scores are all added up and interpreted, varying from unhappy to too happy.

(b) Pursuit of Happiness Project: The project collected data through a widely used and respected questionnaire, and then gathered data was analysed by controlled studies. It involves the most reliable and scientific study of subjective well-being. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, developed by psychologists Michael Argyle and Peter Hills at Oxford University, has been used in the project. It consists of 29 statements about mental states and self-assessment, which are either phrased positively or negatively. The scores are all added up and interpreted, varying from 'not happy' to 'too happy' (Peter Hills, 2001)[xx].

(c) The Penn Authentic Happiness Survey: This survey was developed by Christopher Peterson 2005, a professor at the University of Michigan. The survey looks into positive and negative emotions, day-to-day tasks, and feelings toward the meaning and purpose of life. Twenty-four questions are asked on a Likert scale 5 (Peterson, 2008)[xxi].The scores are all added up and interpreted, varying from unhappy to happy.

(d) PANAS**:** University of Iowa gave another questionnaire comprising two mood scales on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). It consists of positive and negative adjectives that describe personality traits. The respondents link these adjectives to a 5-pointscale, ranging from not at all (1) to significantly (5), indicating how often they experience particular emotions throughout the week (Watson, D 2018)[xxii]. The scores are all added up and interpreted, varying from unhappy to happy.

IV. **Happiness research at the Collective level:** When the researcher compares the happiness of two samples, it is called the collective level of happiness. In this, individual responses are not used. Happiness is converted on an index, and then these indexes are used for the collective level of happiness. Then, these index numbers are characterized and potentially correlated with other factors prevailing in the nation. The following are some of the most popular indexes used to calculate happiness:

(a) OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development): The OECD gave its annual Better Life index. The survey breaks down happiness into 11 categories, from life satisfaction to income (OECD, 2011)[xxiii]:

1. Housing: access to basic facilities and housing expenditure

2. Income: can money buy happiness. OECD looks into net disposable income and wealth.

3. Work: A job helps you stay connected with society, increases self-esteem, and improves skills.

4. Community: social support network to rely on someone when in need,

5. Education: educated individuals commit fewer crimes and live a longer life.

6. Environment: a healthy and clean environment is a source of life satisfaction

7. Civic engagement: a cohesive society where citizens have high confidence in public administration.

8. Health: better health always leads to happiness

9. Life satisfaction: measured on a scale from 1-10.

10. Safety: less loss of property, life, and pain leads to overall happiness

11. Life work balance: fewer working hours, leisure, and personal care lead to happiness.

(b) Australian Unity Well-being Index: The Australian Unity Well-Being Index uses two tools of measurement of well-being: The National well-being index and the personal well-being index. The national well-being index measures issues related to the economic situation, government, social condition, business environment, and national security. The personal well-being index asks participants about satisfaction on a scale of 0-10 across different domains- health, safety, future security, achieving in life, standard of living, community, and personal relationships. Then the scores are converted on a range from 0-100 considering 60-90 as the normal happiness range

(Australian Unity, 2003)[xxiv]. The external factors assessing the quality of life in Australia are also measured in the National well-being index.

(c) Community Well-being Index: The Australian Unity Well-being Index also assists community groups. This is called the Community Well-being Index. It allows groups to collate the well-being of each individual to determine an overall community well-being index score across all ages and genders. In 2000, Australian Unity conceptualised the creation of a national index that would track social progress (Cooke, 2005)[xxv].

(d) The Spirituality Index of Well-Being: It is a newly developed well-being instrument that takes health as a major indicator of quality of life research. It consists of a multistage systematic cross-sectional survey using various reliability tests and validating it using confirmatory factor analysis. The index uses 12 items: 6 from a self-efficiency domain and 6 from a life scheme domain. The index had significant and expected correlations with other quality-of-life instruments that measure well-being (Daaleman, 2004)[xxvi].

(e) Gross National Happiness: GNH uses a range of domains of human well-being. The GNH index consists of 33 indicators and is divided into nine core domains that represent the components of well-being. It implies that human society's material and spiritual development go hand in hand. It covers traditional to less traditional areas of social concern such as living standards, health and education, time use, psychological well-being, culture, community vitality, and environmental diversity. These nine domains emphasize the different ways of meeting the human needs to reach a mental state of happiness. If a citizen meets sufficient achievements in six out of the nine domains or 66% of the weighted indicators, 'happiness' is met according to the GNH index (Bates, 2009)[xxvii].

(f) Integrated Household Survey: It was developed to measure national well-being in the United Kingdom. An integrated household survey is also known as Office of National Statistics. The questionnaire measures four areas childhood, economy, health, inequality, and work/life balance. The study includes four questions concerning subjective indicators that affect our well-being and a 10-point scale (Randall, 2019)[xxviii]

(g) Quality of Life: It is defined as an individual's satisfaction with one's life compared to one's ideal life and is therefore also seen as an indicator of one's happiness. QOL consists of objective, measurable criteria, and subjective criteria. It consists of 19 items concerning quality of life and twenty-one item about quality of working life. This measure of quality of life is identified through nine leading indicators, ranked according to the importance: (1) material welfare (according to GNP); (2) health; (3) political stability and safety; (4) family life; (5) social life; (6) climate and geographical location; (7) employment; (8) political freedom; (9) gender freedom. These items are scaled to the 5-point Likert response format, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). (Ben-Noun, 2019)[xxix].

(h) The World Happiness Report: The World Happiness Report is published yearly since 2012. Various researchers use scientific methods in measuring and understanding happiness at a comparative level taking life evaluations across countries. The happiness score used in the World Happiness Report is the Gallup World Poll. It is collected from more than 160 countries in 140 languages. The Cantril ladder measures happiness with the best possible life at 10, and the worst possible life at 0. The main

life evaluation question asked in the poll is: "Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you feel you stand now?" The Gallup weights use six variables, levels of GDP, life expectancy at birth, generosity, social support, freedom, and corruption, to make a ranking from national representative samples (Helliwell, 2012)[xxx].

Besides these standard and widely used methods used for measuring happiness, specific non-standard methods are adopted.

2.2.2 Non-Standard Methods of Measurement

Standard methods require skilled observers, but in some cases, simple automated observations can be used in measuring happiness. Not all non-standard forms have become the body of science in happiness. Only a few methods have been developed for specific applications.

Examples of these non-standard methods are:

(a) Self-report using multiple questions: Affect balance scales, e.g. Bradburn's Affect Balance Score, Life satisfaction questionnaires e.g. Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale.

(b) Repeated single questions on happiness: Experience Sampling Method e.g. Wessman & Ricks' Personal Feeling Scale, Day Reconstruction Method, e.g. Veenhoven's Happiness Diary

(c) Narrative self-report coded afterwards: Content analysis of open interviews, e.g. Mussen's rating of trait cheerfulness. Content analysis of life reviews, e.g. Danner's rating of happiness in autobiographies Content analysis of diaries, e.g. Newman & Langner scale of post-divorce adaptation (Veenhoven, 2017)[xxxi].

Conclusion: A handful of the most prominent methods and approaches to measuring the happiness index are discussed above. Each method's application varies by nation, based on requirements, etc., but these techniques can be one of the most effective ways to gauge subjective well-being in order to offer each person with an overall quality of life.

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