Ranking by Happiness: A new world order?

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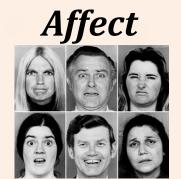**Sarah White PhD** (University of Bath, Dpt. SPS).

Introduction

Benefits of a Wellbeing approach in Public Policy: Design of policies that see beyond economic growth to emphasise more inclusive and people-centred strategies[1].

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB), in the search for the 'good society'[2], has entered the political arena as a **national indicator of "progress"**[3].

Framework: Emanates from **Psychology** and is based on the **individual and his/her perceptions** as the principal unit of analysis.

$$\text{SWB} = \textit{Affect} + \textit{Cognition}$$

Subjective Indicators: Appraise **inner aspects** of people's lives that cannot be externally appraised. The measures designed are varied (Table 1), yet at the national-level **global measures** such as **Happiness** (measuring Affect) and **Life Satisfaction** (cognitive evaluations) prevail for their simple application in large-scale surveys and their apparent culture-neutral cast (general nature).

Cross-cultural applicability? Literature stresses that **Culture** acts like a lens through which people perceive, experience, and evaluate their lives[4]. However, SWB has been confronted for an ideological bias that limits its cross-cultural reliability[5].
The incapacity of considering culture could turn the analysis into a biased evaluation of cultural arrangements and the prescription of what the 'good society' should be.

Objectives: To examined SWB's ability to offer a **culture-neutral framework** and the possible **political implications** of failing to do so by making a **theoretically-based revision** of its methodological and theoretical architecture.

Research questions: (1) How is SWB instrumented for cross-national evaluations? (2) How robust are the measures on which such assessments are based? (3) Are the measures addressing issues of cultural diversity? (4) What are the possible political implications?

Findings

Vulnerabilities of SWB's framework:

➡ **Methodological constraints of instruments** (e.g. response styles) and understudied reliability/validity across cultures.

➡ **Management of instruments**: Common mix-and-match exercise in **samples** and **measures**.

➡ **Theoretical bias**: **Atomistic view of the person and wellbeing,** giving priority to **inner perspectives** and **emotions** and neglecting the **relational** and **collective** features that shape them.
Questions the robustness of measures and uncovers the scarce academic debate that exists regarding the quality of SWB's framework and research practices.

Literature Cited

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Methods

A theory-based dissertation primarily informed by the literature on **SWB** and **Policy-linked Initiatives**. The approach used to analyse them was an **informal deconstruction**[6].

Discussion

Four ways in which SWB fails to effectively embrace culture:

➡ **Theoretical Biases**: The individualistic frame disregards that individual preferences are intertwined with those of its society[1]. SWB views relationships as external variables that influence wellbeing from the outside. SWB partially includes culture by solely bearing Western cultural arrangements, narrowing its cultural boundaries.

➡ **The Entrance of Culture**: Achieved through **global measures** and their general nature? Potentially but their methodological restrictions decrease this possibility. Additionally, its **general nature could also be their greatest weakness**: not possible to appreciate the elements used to respond the questions.

➡ **The Interpretation of Culture**: The real danger of a cultural bias in SWB: Definition of **complementary variables** to understand scores. Have implied which national values/characteristics are better for the emergence of wellbeing[2]. With these variables SWB already prescribes the meaning of happiness and the 'good society'.

➡ **Is national wellbeing the sum of individual wellbeings?**
For White (2010) community wellbeing is not merely about the sum of good feelings, but also about larger moral and cultural dimensions within a shared notion of wellbeing. However, in order to sum individual scores and compare their mean, researchers need to **assume culturally homogenous nations** despite evidence from cross-cultural literature of within-nation differences in response styles.

		SWB	Stiglitz Commission	nef
Affect		**Multi-Item**: Affect Balance Scale, Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.	**On-line**: U-index.	**Positive/Single-Item**: Feeling Happy.
		On-line: U-index.		**Negative/Single-Item**: Feeling Lonely.
		Single-Item: Happiness.		
Cognition		**Single-Item**: Life Satisfaction, Cantril's Ladder.	**Single-Item**: Cantril's Ladder.	**Single-Item**: Life Satisfaction.
		Multi-Item: Satisfaction with Life Scale.		

Solely the measures discussed here are presented in this table. To refer to other measures see Oishi (2010).

Conclusion

Two **Political Implications** of not considering Culture:

➡ **Implicit in Results**: SWB suggest that nations that maintain good levels of **affect**, hold an **individualist outlook**, and a **free-market economy** are better off. **Implications**: Normative claim about the 'good life' suggesting that all nations should strive for an individualistic and Western view of wellbeing. SWB becomes the model of the 'good life' that the world should emulate if they strive to 'progress' and live 'thriving' lives.

➡ **Explicit in Policy Recommendations**: SWB's bias can result in a "production of wellness [that becomes] increasingly a personal responsibility"[7] and which can justify a political status quo where the interference of the state is justified but their provision of welfare is redundant[1]. The policy recommendations turn more comprehensive as they seek to transform **cultural identities** rather than the **circumstances in which people live**.

Is SWB offering a culture-neutral framework?

Our findings suggest that **there is still much work to be done**:

While a wellbeing approach is fundamental for the design of people-centred and inclusive policies, the discoveries of this study strongly suggest the need to **improve the research practice** and **expand the methodologies** of SWB.

The ranking of nations stops being about income, but it lingers in the form of which cultural traits are compatible with SWB's conception of wellbeing. This could arguably be a **more ubiquitous form of world order**.

Further information
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