

Beyond Subjective Well-being: A Critical Review of the Stiglitz Report Approach to Subjective Perspectives on Quality of Life

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Key intervention

‘Another key message, and unifying theme of the report, is that the time is ripe for our measurement system to *shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being.*’

(Stiglitz et al., 2009:12, original emphasis)



Background

- Stiglitz report commissioned by President Sarkozy, 2008
- Led by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen
- Remit to look at alternatives to GDP in measuring national level statistical data about society and economy
- Highly influential: e.g. UK ONS consultation 2011 on what matters to people
- *Not* that subjective should replace objective – alternative indicator alongside others



This paper

- Welcome the way report has strengthened place of wellbeing on international agenda and subjective perspectives on quality of life
- But concern at limited approach that is taken to this, and the potential implications if this is adopted uncritically
- Issues:
 - Limited focus
 - Methods/measures /concepts
 - Universally applicable?
 - Politics – including north/south
- Drawing on 1st year of wellbeing pathways research (Zambia, India)



Subjective well-being: the concept

- 'Subjective measures of quality of life' identified with subjective well-being (SWB) – becomes a quasi domain of its own
- Apparent simplicity: asking people directly about satisfaction and positive/negative emotions ('affect')
- People self-report, so take own values into account

But:

- What is it? A means of measurement that has become reified into a property of persons?
- Synthetic – combination of 2 measures designed for different purposes
- More – or less – than happiness?
- Other approaches, even within psychology, look at functioning and fulfilment – is SWB slim or thin?



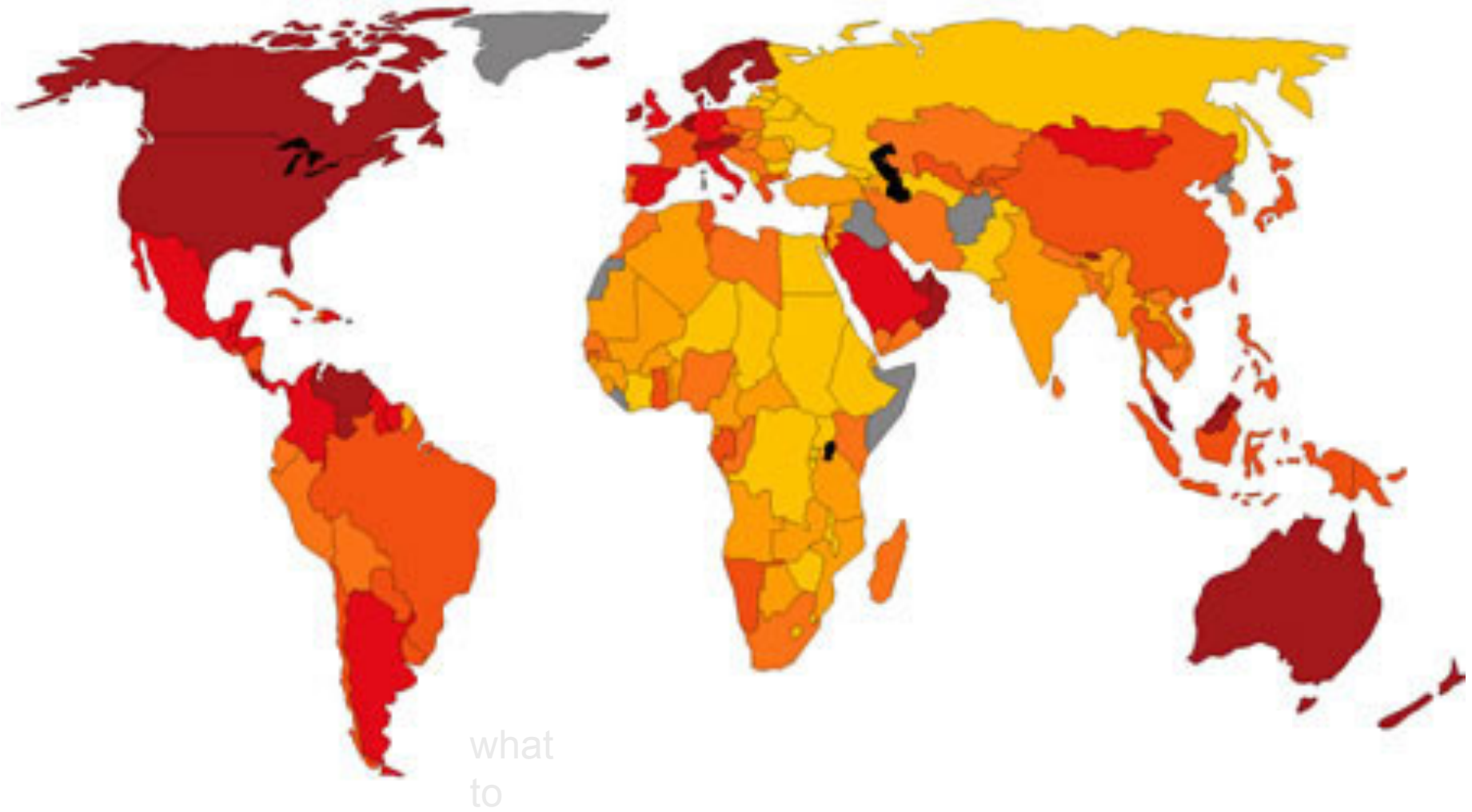
One size fits all?

Our research suggests cultural and economic context plays a much greater part in shaping both inner wellbeing and the methods used to measure it:

- Cultures of questioning: Abstract and generalised vs specific and tangible
- Indirect vs direct cultures of expression: implications through more general statements: 'the life of a woman!' or stories
- Questions about the future led to response 'who can tell what the future will hold?'
- Many statements about self are difficult: negative statements may be feared to attract the evil eye; comparisons with others may be seen as invidious; professing pride in one's own achievements may be seen as inappropriate

A new vision of the world?

A Global Projection of Subjective Well-being



High SWB - - - - - Low SWB

what
to

Adrian White,
University of Leicester, 2007



Politics of SWB

- Potential of wellbeing to challenge conventional north-south polarities
- But increasingly SWB used to reinforce them: former Communist and Islamic countries 'quite joyless', Latin America 'high levels of affect'
- Good for development studies (poverty also makes people unhappy)?
- Or dangerous: another axis for the claim of western superiority?



Conclusion

- SWB is one way of assessing subjective perspectives, but there are alternatives, even within the psychology literature
- Need to question universality: much more attention needed to cultural bias within the concepts and means of measurement
- Where is the subject in the subjective?
 - Is there some collective bad faith in seeking ‘objective’ evidence from subjective indicators?
 - Need assess subjective across domains, not contain it in one
 - Need to make space for the qualitative – hear the subaltern speak!
- Watch the politics and reversion to ‘West is Best’ narrative

See also: www.wellbeingpathways.org