Recent Findings on Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a field of psychology that attempts to understand people's evaluations of their lives. These evaluations may be primarily cognitive (e.g., life satisfaction or marital satisfaction) or may consist of the frequency with which people experience pleasant emotions (e.g., joy, as measured by the experience sampling technique) and unpleasant emotions (e.g., depression). Researchers in the field strive to understand not just undesirable clinical states, but also differences between people in positive levels of long-term well-being. The article briefly reviews research on measuring SWB, on the demographic correlates of it, and cultural differences in reports of SWB. We also describe influences on SWB such as temperament, and theoretical models of SWB (e.g., context approaches).

Defining Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to how people evaluate their lives, and includes variables such as life satisfaction and marital satisfaction, lack of depression and anxiety, and positive moods and emotions. The idea of SWB or happiness has intrigued thinkers for millennia, although it is only in recent years that it has been measured and studied in a systematic way. A person's evaluation of his or her life may be in the form of cognitions (e.g., when a person gives conscious evaluative judgments about his or her satisfaction with life as a whole,
or evaluative judgments about specific aspects of his or life such as recreation). However, an evaluation of one's life also may be in the form of affect (people experiencing unpleasant or pleasant moods and emotions in reaction to their lives). Thus, a person is said to have high SWB if she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experience unpleasant emotions such as sadness and anger. Contrariwise, a person is said to have low SWB if he or she is dissatisfied with life, experiences little joy and affection, and frequently feels negative emotions such as anger or anxiety. The cognitive and affective components of SWB are highly interrelated, and only recently are we beginning to understand the relations between various types of SWB.

Most people evaluate what is happening to them as either good or bad, so they are normally able to offer judgments about their lives. Furthermore, people virtually always experience moods and emotions, which have an hedonic component that is pleasant, signalling a positive reaction, or unpleasant, signalling a negative reaction. Thus, people have a level of SWB even if they do not often consciously think about it, and the psychological system offers virtually a constant evaluation of what is happening to the person.

**Hallmarks of subjective well-being.** There are several cardinal characteristics in the study of SWB (Diener, 1984). First, the field covers the entire range of well-being from agony to ecstasy. It does not focus only on undesirable states such as depression or hopelessness. Instead, individual differences in levels of positive well-being are also considered important. Thus, the field of SWB includes the undesirable states that are treated by clinical psychologists, but is not limited to the study of these undesirable states. In other words, the field is concerned not just with the causes of depression and anxiety, but also with the factors that differentiate slightly happy people from moderately happy and extremely happy people.

Second, SWB is defined in terms of the internal experience of the respondent. An external frame of reference is not imposed when assessing SWB. Although many criteria of mental health are dictated from outside by researchers and practitioners (e.g., maturity, autonomy, realism), SWB is measured from the individual's own perspective. If a woman thinks her life is going well, then it is going well within this framework. Again, this characteristic focus on the respondent's point of view differentiates the field of SWB from traditional clinical psychology. In the latter field weight is given to people's own perceptions of their lives, but oftentimes people are seen to have a problem even if they themselves do not realize it. In the field of SWB, a person's beliefs about his or her own well-being are of paramount importance. Naturally, this approach has both advantages and disadvantages. Although it gives ultimate authority to our respondents, it also means that SWB cannot be a consummate definition of mental health because people may be disordered even if they are happy. Thus, a psychologist will usually consider measures in addition to SWB in evaluating a person's mental health.

A final hallmark of SWB is that the field focuses on longer-term states, not just momentary moods. Although a person's moods are likely to fluctuate with each new event, the SWB researcher is most interested in the person's moods over time. Often, what leads to happiness at the moment may not be the same as what
produces long-term SWB. Thus, we are interested in relatively enduring feelings of well-being, not just fleeting emotions.

Is SWB necessary and sufficient for mental health? Subjective well-being is not synonymous with mental health or psychological health. A delusional person might be happy and satisfied with his life, and yet we would not say that he possesses mental health. A person who is out of touch with her own motives and emotions might say she is happy, but we would not consider her to possess complete psychological health. Thus, SWB is not a sufficient condition for psychological well-being. Carol Ryff (1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) outlines additional characteristics beyond SWB (e.g., environmental mastery, personal growth, and purpose in life) that are important to mental health. Therefore, although we believe that SWB is important, it is not identical to psychological health.

Is SWB a necessary condition for mental health? It appears that some people function well in many aspects of their lives, but are not particularly happy. Examples come to mind of individuals who are dysphoric, but who make significant contributions to society. Some might argue, however, that SWB is a necessary condition for mental health because a person cannot be functioning well if he or she is depressed for prolonged periods of time, or suffers from debilitating anxiety. We have not yet determined, however, the level of SWB that is optimal for mental health and good functioning.

Subjective well-being is only one aspect of psychological well-being. Nevertheless, the subjective frame of reference implicit in the concept of SWB has the strength of being based on the respondent's own internal perspective, and thus gives priority and respect to people's own views of their lives. Rather than a standard imposed by a mental health professional, SWB grants importance to the experience of people. The focus on an internal perspective means that other criteria of well-being recognized by the community, philosophers, or by mental health professionals may not be met in every individual who has high SWB. Although we cannot say whether high SWB is essential for mental health, we can say that most people consider it to be a desirable characteristic.

Components of subjective well-being. There are three primary components of SWB: satisfaction, pleasant affect, and low levels of unpleasant affect. Subjective well-being is structured such that these three components form a global factor of interrelated variables. Each of the three major facets of SWB can in turn be broken into subdivisions. Global satisfaction can be divided into satisfaction with the various domains of life such as recreation, love, marriage, friendship, and so forth, and these domains can in turn be divided into facets. Pleasant affect can be divided into specific emotions such as joy, affection, and pride. Finally, unpleasant or unpleasant affect can be separated into specific emotions and moods such as shame, guilt, sadness, anger, and anxiety. Each of the subdivisions of affect can also be subdivided even further. Subjective well-being can be assessed at the most global level, or at progressively narrower levels, depending on one's purposes. For example, one researcher might study life satisfaction, whereas another might study the narrower topic of marital satisfaction. The justification for studying more global levels (rather than just focusing on the most molecular concepts) is that the
narrower levels tend to co-occur. In other words, there is a tendency for people to experience similar levels of well-being across different aspects of their lives, and the study of molar levels can help us understand the general influences on SWB that cause these covariations. A justification for studying narrower definitions of SWB is that we can gain a greater understanding of specific conditions that might influence well-being in particular domains. Furthermore, narrower types of measures are often more sensitive to causal variables.

**Measuring Subjective Well-Being**

The usual method of measuring SWB is through self-report surveys in which the respondent judges and reports his life satisfaction, the frequency of her pleasant affect, or the frequency of his unpleasant emotions. For example, Pavot and Diener (1993) review evidence on the Satisfaction With Life Scale, which is shown below:

Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

7 - Strongly agree  
6 - Agree  
5 - Slightly agree  
4 - Neither agree nor disagree  
3 - Slightly disagree  
2 - Disagree  
1 - Strongly disagree

___ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

___ The conditions of my life are excellent.

___ I am satisfied with my life.

___ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life

___ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The SWLS is free and can be used without permission from the authors. Other questionnaires are available to measure pleasant and unpleasant affect. For example, Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) PANAS is designed to separately measure both positive and negative affect. Watson et al.'s scale tends to measure aroused or activated states of affect (e.g., excitement and distress), and thus a researcher may prefer in some situations to use scales that measure a wider range of emotions (e.g., contentment and embarrassment). In addition to the above measures, a description of useful measures can be found in Andrews and Robinson (1991).

The assumption behind self-reports of SWB is that the respondent is in a
privileged position to report his or her experience of well-being. Indeed, only the respondent can experience her or his pleasures and pains, and judge whether her or his life seems worthwhile based on internal experience. Thus, self-report measures seem particularly appropriate in this field.

Self-report scales that are designed to measure SWB usually correlate with each other, and converge with SWB assessed by other methods (Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993). However, because of the potential shortcomings of self-report measures (e.g., response biases, memory biases, and defensiveness), investigators work to develop other ways of measuring SWB. For example, people's frequency of smiling, their ability to recall positive versus negative events from their lives, and reports from the target respondent's family and friends are useful measures of SWB (Sandvik et al., 1993). In addition to standard questionnaires, alternative methods based on self-reports such as interviews and the experience sampling method (mood reports are collected at random moments over a period of weeks) can also be helpful. In addition, behavioral observations of affect expression in natural settings correlate with informant reports of emotion. Finally, electrophysiological measures such as electroencephalograms and electromyographic facial recordings also converge with self-reports of SWB. It is encouraging that measures based on diverse methodologies correlate and provide similar estimates of well-being because the multi-measure approach helps rule out artifactual explanations of the self-report data. There should also be a recognition that other methodologies complement self-reports in their strengths, and that self-report scales are not the only method by which to assess experience. Although each of the non-self-report methods has its own shortcomings, psychologists can gain an especially strong assessment of SWB by using several methods in tandem because in this way a number of response artifacts can be eliminated.

Measures of SWB show moderate to high temporal reliability. For example, life satisfaction correlates .58 over a four year period, and this correlation remains strong (.52) when informant reports of life satisfaction are substituted at the second testing (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993). In addition, pleasant affect and unpleasant affect have a degree of stability across a period of many years (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1988; Headey & Wearing, 1992). These findings suggest that SWB does change, but that there is some constancy in it even over a prolonged period.

**On-line versus global subjective well-being.** Another important area in assessing SWB is the distinction between on-line measures of well-being (at the moment) versus global reports of longer time periods that are based on memory. If we randomly sample people's experiences over time, we can obtain a measure of their on-line levels of SWB. Often pagers, alarm watches, or hand-held computers are used for the random experience sampling method to assess whether most of a person's moments are pleasant or unpleasant? In contrast, we can also ask respondents for a retrospective, global evaluation. For example, "How happy have you been during the past year?" Or, "How frequently have you felt pleasant emotions during the past month?" For a person who has no hippocampus and no memory, only the immediate moment matters. For most people, however, the past and future are more important than the current instant in time. Thus, some incidents may be unpleasant as they are experienced moment-by-moment, but may

be perceived in a positive manner when they are finished. Therefore, global judgments and on-line feelings may both be quite important in humans, and are likely to reflect somewhat different phenomena.

The distinction between the two types of SWB is heightened because certain "biases" exist when momentary affect is translated into global reports. That is, on-line or momentary moods are not reflected in a straightforward way when global judgments are requested. For instance, in formulating global judgments, people heavily weight the peak moment during an episode, and also strongly attend to how the episode ended. Fredrickson and Kahneman (1993) call this the peak/end rule. They find that people show relative neglect for how long an episode lasted in evaluating how pleasant it was. An episode that ends well is more likely to be remembered positively, regardless of how pleasant it was earlier. Thus, we are beginning to develop an understanding of SWB defined as a series of happy moments versus happiness defined as global judgments. Although on-line and global SWB are related, they are not identical. The understanding of the causes of these two different modes of SWB is in its infancy, although this area does have applied implications. For example, clients reporting on their moods to their therapist are likely to heavily weight recent episodes, and might also give special significance to their most intense moods.

**Cognition and Subjective Well-Being**

An idea that has long captivated writers is that how we perceive and think about the world determines our SWB. In certain philosophical and religious traditions, advice about constructive thinking is offered that appears to be designed to guide one's moods and emotions. For example, mental detachment from the world is counseled in some religious traditions in order to damper one's unpleasant emotions. Philosophical traditions such as stoicism also recommended thinking in a certain manner in order to steel oneself against adversity.

Cognitive theories of well-being and ill-being within the behavioral sciences were developed in the last decades. For example, the attributional theory of depression is well-known. Depressed individuals are more likely to believe that negative events are caused by global and stable causes, such that negative events are very likely to continue to happen to them. Beck (1967) popularized the idea that depressed people think about the world in self-defeating ways. In the area of SWB, researchers find that one can dampen or amplify one's emotions by what one thinks, and thereby experience more or less intense emotions (Larsen, Diener, & Cropanzano, 1987). Thus, the belief of the stoics, ascetics, Buddhists, and others, that how "attached" or psychologically involved one becomes with goals and life circumstances can influence how intensely one reacts, has been confirmed empirically.

Happy people are likely to experience more events that are considered desirable in the culture, but also have a propensity to interpret and recall ambiguous events as good (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1996; Seidtitz & Diener, 1993). People with high SWB are also more likely to perceive "neutral" events as positive. Thus, people with high SWB may not only experience objectively more positive events, but they also seem to perceive events more positively than do people who are low in
SWB.

Theories of coping are based on the idea that in order to cope with problems, happy people initiate thoughts and behaviors that are adaptive and helpful, whereas on average unhappy people cope in more destructive ways. For example, happy people are more likely to see the bright side of affairs, pray, directly struggle with problems, and seek help from others, whereas unhappy people are more likely to engage in fantasy, blame others and themselves, and avoid working on problems (McCrae & Costa, 1986). What is not yet known is whether these coping styles are the cause or effect of SWB.

People might increase their SWB by the control of their thoughts. For example, perhaps SWB can be increased by believing in a larger meaning or force in the universe. Support for this proposition comes from findings showing that on average religious people are happier than nonreligious people (e.g., Ellison, 1991; Myers, 1992, Pollner, 1989). Further, SWB is higher if a person concentrates on attainable goals, and does not focus attention exclusively on distant, difficult goals (Emmons, 1986, 1992). Finally, one can heighten SWB by being optimistic about one's future (Scheier & Carver, 1993). It is not known whether these cognitive factors correlate with SWB because of the influence of some third variable such as temperament, or whether the cognitions have an independent long-term influence on SWB.

Cross-Cultural Findings

People in poor nations show average SWB scores close to, or slightly below, the neutral point. Countries that are wealthier possess greater freedom and human rights, and an emphasis on individualism, and have citizens with higher SWB (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995) -- scoring between slight and strong SWB. Surprisingly, other factors such as the economic growth and the cultural homogeneity of a society do not correlate with average levels of SWB.

Although reports of SWB are higher in individualistic nations, the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism produces complex effects. Individualistic cultures are those that emphasize the individual -- her autonomy, motives, and so forth. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, the group (e.g., the family) is often considered more important than the individual. There is an emphasis on harmonious group functioning, and the belief that the individual's motives and emotions should be secondary. In individualistic nations, reports of global well-being are high, and satisfaction with domains such as marriage are extremely high. Nevertheless, suicide rates and divorce rates in these same individualistic nations are also high (Diener & Suh, in press-b). It may be that people in individualistic nations make more attributions for events internally to themselves, and therefore the effects are amplified when things go either well or badly. It might also be that individualists are more able to follow their own interests and desires, and therefore more often find self-fulfillment. At the same time, there may be less social support in individualistic cultures during troubled periods. Furthermore, individualists are more likely to get divorced, or even commit suicide, if things do not go well. Thus, individualists may experience more extreme levels of SWB, whereas collectivists may have a safer structure that
produces fewer people who are very happy but perhaps also fewer people who are isolated and depressed. Our data support this line of reasoning in that not only do individualistic nations have higher suicide and divorce rates, but they also have higher reports of SWB.

Another intriguing finding from our laboratory is that individualists and collectivists construct their life satisfaction judgments in different ways (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1997). Among college students in individualistic cultures, where a person's internal attributes are seen as primary determinants of psychological behavior, life satisfaction judgments are based predominantly on one's recent emotional experiences.

In the case of collectivistic college students, on the other hand, life satisfaction judgments are based both on emotions as well as the perceived cultural value of a satisfying life.

Previous studies on life satisfaction judgments were often focused on the effect of transient factors, such as comparison standards and mood (e.g., Schwarz & Strack, in press), on this evaluation process. If the field strives to have a better understanding on how global evaluations of their lives are reached by individuals, our findings suggest that it is also necessary to study the chronic influence of more stable factors (e.g., culture) on this judgment process.

One other finding of note is that there are significant differences across nations in terms of the norms governing the experience of various emotions. The more interesting aspect of this finding, however, is that the norm reports and the level of actual emotional experiences were related across nations only in the case of pleasant emotions, but not of unpleasant emotions (Diener, Suh, Oishi, & Shao, 1996). In other words, pleasant emotions were experienced more often among nations that expressed more positive attitudes toward positive emotions. The normative desirability of unpleasant emotions, on the other hand, did not covary with the amount of reported levels of unpleasant emotions across nations. Despite the significance of the question, we cannot be certain from our present data as to why such contrasting pattern of results were obtained between pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Theoretically intriguing questions will continually emerge as the field of cross-cultural psychology and SWB converse more intimately in the future. A challenging, but an extremely exciting future lies ahead for this burgeoning field (Suh & Diener, 1995).

**Temperament and Subjective Well-Being**

Temperament has a powerful effect on SWB. Studies of heritability in which twins separated at birth are studied as adults found that both pleasant and unpleasant affect have a strong genetic basis (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996; Tellegen, Lykken, Bouchard, Wilcox, Segal, & Rich, 1988). In the case of pleasant affect, about half of the variation between individuals appeared to be heritable in a western sample, and a small proportion of variance seems to be due to common family environment. In the case of unpleasant affect, the heritability coefficient is even stronger and little variation was due to shared family environment. Indeed, Lykken and Tellegen estimated that 80 percent of the variability in long-term negative
affect is due to inherited characteristics. Although heritability coefficients may differ in other environments, the twin data show convincingly that some proportion of SWB is due to one's genetic make-up. Further supporting the idea of an inborn influence on SWB, measures of emotional reactivity in young infants predicts later fear responses (Kagan, 1994). Thus, even at an early age, individuals react in a characteristic way to stimuli. Another piece of evidence supporting the importance of temperament to well-being is that people who undergo changes in marital status, employment status, or residence are no less stable in well-being over the long-term than individuals who do not change status in these areas (Costa, McCrae, & Zonderman, 1987).

In adults, optimism, self-esteem, and extraversion are several of the personality traits possessed by happy people. For example, informant reports of extraversion and sociability correlate with the amount of pleasant affect that nursing home residents display. Extraverts in a national probability sample in the U.S.A. who lived in a variety of different circumstances experienced higher SWB (Diener, Sandvik, Pavot, & Fujita, 1992). It is useful, however, to differentiate the separate components of SWB. The two major forms of affect, pleasant and unpleasant, appear to be related to the separate personality factors of extraversion and neuroticism, respectively. Although extraverts experience more pleasant affect, they do not experience a predictable level of unpleasant affect. Neurotics are very likely to experience high levels of unpleasant affect, but are less predictable when it comes to levels of pleasant affect. When measurement error is controlled, the relations between these two facets of affect and these two personality dimensions are strong in Western nations. What is not yet known is whether extraversion predicts pleasant affect to the same extent in different cultures such as in India or Nepal.

Extraversion and neuroticism are cardinal traits that are part of a system of personality labelled the Five Factor Model (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1985). Two more traits in this model, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, are correlated moderately with SWB. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness might relate to SWB because of environmental rewards. That is, in many or most environments, people who are agreeable and conscientious may receive more positive reinforcements from others, and therefore may experience higher SWB. For example, a conscientious person might receive better grades in school, better pay at work, and may even be more likely to have a good marriage. Thus, although conscientiousness might not directly produce greater SWB, it might result in receiving rewards that heighten one's SWB. If agreeableness and conscientiousness are related to SWB because of the reinforcement structure, their relation to SWB may differ across cultures.

The fifth cardinal trait in the Five Factor Model, Openness, may relate to emotional intensity (having both intense unpleasant and pleasant emotions) rather than to hedonic balance. Larsen and Diener (1987) suggest that emotional intensity is a personality trait that may influence the quality of one's happiness -- whether one is likely to be elated versus contented, or is distressed versus melancholic.

Much more research is needed to fully understand the relation of the "Big Five" traits to SWB. For example, we do not know which facets of extraversion (e.g.,
warmth versus surgency) most relate to pleasant affect, whether the correlations occur cross-culturally, and we are uncertain about the causal direction between pleasant affect and extraversion.

Self-esteem covaries with SWB, although this relation is stronger in individualistic societies where the "self" stands out as more important (Diener & Diener, 1995). In collectivist cultures self-esteem and life satisfaction are typically related, but not so strongly as in individualistic western nations. Not surprisingly, optimism is related to SWB in the United States (Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). Similarly, Taylor and Armor (1996) note that positive illusions (i.e., self-aggrandizement, unrealistic optimism, and exaggerated perceptions of control) are common among North Americans and function as coping mechanism to restore and maintain positive psychological and physical health of Americans. However, recent cross-cultural studies (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1995; Lee & Seligman, 1997) found that such positive illusions are not common among Asians, suggesting that self-enhancement and optimism may not lead to higher SWB in all cultures.

Therefore, although many personality predispositions have been related to SWB in Western cultures, most of this work has not yet been replicated across diverse societies. Without such cross-cultural replication, we do not know whether the relations uncovered between personality and SWB are due to environmental rewards or to universal biological systems. An unanswered question for clinical psychologists is whether teaching people to have the personality characteristics of happy people will increase their SWB.

**Demographic variables and well-being**

Although temperament appears to be strongly related to SWB, demographic factors are often only weakly correlated with it. For example, Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) found that all demographic factors together accounted for less than 20 percent of the variance in SWB. Variables such as education, ethnic status, and age often correlate at very low levels with reports of SWB. Nevertheless, some demographic variables do consistently predict SWB. For example, married people of both sexes report more happiness than those who are never married, divorced, or separated (e.g., Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991). One benefit of marriage may be providing interesting and supportive social interactions for the individual. Furthermore, there is evidence that happy people are more likely to marry in the first place (Mastekaasa, 1991; Scott, 1991), so the causal influence between SWB and marriage may work in both directions. In addition to the effects of marriage on participants, we have found differences in SWB between the children of intact marriages versus divorced marriages (Gohm, Darlington, Diener, & Oishi, 1997). We found that life satisfaction is lower when one's parents had a highly conflictual marriage or when they were divorced, and we found that this pattern was true in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Perhaps growing up in a conflictual or distrusting environment interferes with one's later social relationships because of the cognitive templates it builds for relating to other people.

Several types of evidence bear on the question of whether money makes people happy. In the first place, there are substantial differences in the self-reports of
SWB between rich and poor nations. In contrast, SWB reports have not changed at all in wealthy nations such as the U.S.A., Japan, and France as they have gained more income over the last 20 years (Diener, 1995). Furthermore, Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, and Diener (1993) found that respondents in the U.S.A. whose income increased or decreased did not change in SWB. Finally, we know that the correlation between income and SWB is small in most countries. Therefore, there is a mixed pattern of evidence regarding the effects of income on SWB. One possibility is that income only influences SWB at lower levels where physical needs are at stake, but that increasing levels of wealth above this level make little difference to happiness.

**Context Theories of SWB**

Some theorists such as Veenhoven (1991) maintain that SWB is caused by the satisfaction of basic, universal human needs. He maintains, for example, that people can only be happy if needs such as hunger, warmth, and thirst are fulfilled. In contrast, context theories emphasize that the factors that influence SWB are variable across both time and individuals, and that how good or bad life events are considered to be is based on the circumstances in which people live. The relevant context varies in different theories. In adaptation theory, for example, the relevant context is the person's past life, whereas in social comparison models the context is considered to be social others of whom the target individual is aware. Other contexts that could influence SWB are the person's ideals, and imagining counterfactual alternative situations. Finally, in the goal approach, the context is believed to be the person's conscious aims. In each of the context models, whether something is good or bad, and how good or bad it is, is thought to be based on changeable factors rather than on biological universals.

**Adaptation**

Demographic variables such as age, education, sex, and ethnicity often have weak relations to SWB. For example, across 40 nations, women and men, and people of different ages, on average hardly differ in SWB (Diener & Suh, in press-a). The absence of large demographic differences in SWB led researchers to examine the processes of habituation or adaptation to new conditions. The idea of adaptation is that people initially react strongly to new life events or circumstances, but over time habituate and return to baseline. For example, a positive event such as winning the lottery boosted one's mood, but the person is likely to over time return to his or her original level. Thus, in context theories, events are not seen to have an inherent value, but instead are believed to be evaluated against a backdrop of other factors.

Indirect support for the idea of adaptation comes from the data showing that many demographic variables correlated only weekly with SWB. For example, income in the U.S.A. correlates only about .12 with SWB — almost no correlation at all. Further, in one study lottery winners were nonsignificantly happier than others (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Physical attractiveness among young adults, like wealth, shows a weak covariation with SWB (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995). Perhaps most surprising, objective health among the elderly is only faintly correlated with SWB (Okun & George, 1984). In another study people with
disabilities who were confined to wheelchairs were about as happy as a nondisabled comparison group (Allman, 1990). The presence of positive SWB in these groups who suffer incapacities in daily living is indicative of adaptation to even severe conditions. Finally, Diener and Suh (in press-a) found indirect evidence for adaptation to conditions in that the elderly have lower income, have less perceived freedom, and are more likely to be widowed, and yet report as much life satisfaction as younger persons.

More direct evidence for adaptation comes from longitudinal studies in which it is found that significant events are greeted with strong emotions, but that these dampen over time. One dramatic study by Roxanne Silver (1980) found that spinal cord injured paraplegics and quadriplegics experienced, not surprisingly, a large amount of unpleasant affect after the accident that produced their paralysis. Within eight weeks, however, the pleasant affect of these accident victims was stronger than their unpleasant affect. In another study the average life events of students following college graduation (events such as getting married, obtaining a new job, being promoted at work) had an impact lasting three months or less (Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). This did not mean that events never had a longer impact, but that most events produced a short impact on SWB. A thorough review of the research on adaptation can be found in Loewenstein and Frederick (in press).

It appears that one's long-term baseline of well-being is strongly influenced by one's temperament, for example by traits such as extraversion and neuroticism. Good and bad events cause a positive or negative deflection, respectively, from this baseline. Nevertheless, over time the person drifts back to his or her baseline. In an Australian panel study spanning an eight year period, it was found that the adaptation model provided a good description of the interaction of life events, personality, and SWB. Headey and Wearing (1989) describe their data in terms of a "dynamic equilibrium," in which life events cause changes in SWB, but in which over time people move back toward their baseline of SWB that is caused by their temperament.

The idea of adaptation cannot be pushed to the extreme position that the environment has no long-term influence on SWB because some circumstances do seem to continually influence it. For example, as reviewed above, there are substantial differences between nations in SWB. These differences relate to the income, human rights record, and democratic institutions in these societies. Nations with few human rights and dire poverty report levels of SWB that are substantially lower than wealthier societies with a good record on human rights. These findings suggest that people may not adapt completely to all conditions, no matter how bad. Another example of incomplete adaptation is the finding of Lichtenstein et al. (1996) on adult twins who were either bereaved or not. Gatz et al. found that some negative effects of widowhood persisted beyond 3 years. Further evidence of incomplete adaptation comes from a nationally representative sample of people with disabling conditions in which it was found that they did report lower life satisfaction on average, especially if they suffered from multiple disabilities (Mehnert, Krauss, Nadler, & Boyd, 1990). Loewenstein and Frederick (in press) review evidence suggesting that people do not adapt to living in very noisy places. Thus, although adaptation is a powerful force that may dampen the impact of most conditions, it may not be complete or may not occur in all
circumstances. Thus, research is needed to discover the limits of adaptation.

Social comparison and subjective well-being

In 1974, Richard Easterlin proposed that nations do not differ in SWB because people within nations compare only to each other on attributes such as income. Therefore, although richer people within a nation are likely to be happier than poorer people in that country, nations ought not differ in SWB, according to Easterlin. Furthermore, based on the imposed social comparisons approach, the average person in any nation ought to be neutral in SWB because about half of the people will be above average and about half will be below average. Research demonstrates, however, that most people have SWB above neutral (Diener & C. Diener, 1996). In the U.S.A., for example, about 85% of people report a positive level of SWB. In some domains such as family life, even higher percentages report satisfaction. For global SWB, investigators have replicated the "most people are happy effect" using measures other than global self-reports (e.g., memory measures, experience sampling, and informant reports). More surprising is the fact that even disadvantaged persons such as disabled and chronically mentally ill individuals also report SWB above the neutral point. Representative surveys conducted in industrialized nations reveal the same pattern, with most societies falling in the slightly to moderately happy range. We do not yet know why most respondents report positive SWB -- whether this is because most people live in generally positive life circumstances or whether most people have a biological set-point that returns them to pleasant affect. Nevertheless, these data seem to cast doubt on Easterlin's thesis. Another damaging piece of evidence is that nations do differ in predictable ways in SWB.

Other evidence also casts serious doubt on imposed social comparison approaches to SWB. They show that people with similar characteristics who live around fortunate or unfortunate others do not differ as predicted by the idea of imposed social comparisons. For example, people with similar incomes who live either in wealthier or in poorer neighborhoods do not differ in the way predicted by the idea of imposed social comparisons (Diener, Sandvik, Scidtiz, & Diener, 1993). People who had a moderate income, for instance, were about equally happy whether they lived either in a poorer or wealthier geographic area. Social comparison does not automatically produce happiness when one is around others who are inferior on some characteristic. Instead, the data support a coping model of social comparison in which people selectively choose others with whom to compare (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983; Will, 1981; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). In some cases, people even create an imaginary person with whom to compare in order to achieve their objectives. The coping idea is that people can look to others to help motivate themselves, to boost their moods, and to gain specific knowledge. People can increase their SWB by attending to others who are either superior or inferior to themselves. Thus, the idea that SWB is usually influenced by whether we are better off than those who are immediately around us seems oversimplified.

Values, goals, and meaning

Telic theories posit that SWB is gained when goals and needs are reached (Diener,
1984). Thus, the causes of SWB are not universal, but differ depending on people's values and desires. Different aspects of goals are related to different components of SWB. For example, individuals high in SWB perceived their goals as more important and as higher in their probability of success (Emmons, 1986), whereas those low in SWB perceived more conflict between their goals (Emmons & King, 1988). Carver and Scheier (1990) further postulated that progress toward goals at a rate higher than the standard leads to positive affect, whereas progress at a rate lower than the standard leads to negative affect. Consistent with Carver and Scheier's hypothesis, Brunstein (1993) found in a longitudinal study that perceived progress toward goals caused positive changes in SWB rather than vice versa. Brunstein (1993) further found that a higher level of commitment, along with a sense of progress, contributed to higher SWB.

The success of people in meeting their goals also depends on their strategies and situational affordances (Cantor, 1994; Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Norem & Cantor, 1986; Spencer & Norem, 1996). Norem and Illingworth (1993), for instance, found that individuals high in defensive pessimism performed a cognitive task better under a deliberation condition, whereas individuals high in strategic optimism performed the task better under a distraction condition. Cantor and Harlow (1994) further demonstrated that the congruence between life task pursuit and social context (e.g., the pursuit of academic success on weekdays as opposed to Friday night) was related to positive emotional experiences. These findings, therefore, illuminate the importance of flexible life task pursuit in attaining needs and goals. In the telic approach, SWB ought to follow from people using strategies that are compatible with their personality and their environment in pursuing their goals.

According to telic theories, to the extent that people have different goals, the causes of SWB ought to differ. There are now studies that find variations between people in terms of what covaries with SWB. For example, the exact resources (e.g., money and social skills) that most strongly predict SWB for an individual are likely to be those that are required to gain his or her specific aims (Diener & Fujita, 1995). If a person does not value athletic achievement and has no athletic goals, athletic ability is unlikely to be related to her SWB. It is noteworthy that the analysis of goals as mediators in the relation between resources and SWB highlights idiographic ways in which each individual attains (or attempts to attain) SWB.

An individual's life tasks or goals are influenced by developmental phases, cultural goals, and individual needs (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1989). In the U.S.A., academic success and intimacy are representative life tasks among college students, whereas social participation is a prototypical life task among retirees (Cantor & Harlow, 1994). Most relevant to SWB research is that a shift in life tasks is accompanied by changes in the dominant predictors of SWB. Specifically, for college students, satisfaction with grades and satisfaction with romantic relationship were strong predictors of overall life satisfaction (Emmons & Diener, 1985). On the other hand, work satisfaction was a major predictor among working adults, and social participation was a significant predictor of overall life satisfaction for retirees (Harlow & Cantor, 1996). As such, although the level of life satisfaction is fairly stable (e.g., Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993), factors predicting SWB may
change over time. Therefore, it is important to examine shifts in correlates of SWB across life span to understand processes of SWB.

Although the above telic approaches treat different goals as equivalent in terms of their ability to produce SWB, it is possible that the content of goals differs in terms of efficacy in producing SWB. In other words, some types of goals may be more beneficial than others. Veenhoven (1991) proposed that aims related to universal human needs are those that produce long-term SWB. According to this approach, people cannot be happy when experiencing chronic hunger, danger, or isolation. In this view, some goal strivings and success may not produce SWB because they are based on superficial desires that are not based on intrinsic human needs. In contrast, obtaining food and other biological needs is more likely to be predictive of SWB, according to Veenhoven.

A related approach proposed by Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci (1996) states that some goals serve intrinsic needs, whereas other goals are extrinsic in nature (they are instrumental or substitutes for deeper needs). Goals that meet intrinsic needs such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence are hypothesized to predict SWB, whereas goals reflecting extrinsic needs are hypothesized to be negative predictors of well-being. Supportive data collected by Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) showed that the relative centrality of self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feelings were positively associated with greater well-being, whereas the centrality of financial success, social recognition, and physical attractiveness were associated with negative well-being, such as lack of vitality and more physical symptoms. Similarly, McAdams and Vaillant (1982) observed that individuals high in intimacy motives exhibited higher overall psychological adjustment. Emmons (1991) also found that individuals pursuing personal strivings related to power experienced negative emotions significantly more frequently than those pursuing academic goals. In a daily diary study, Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis (1996) showed that the degree of success in domains related to autonomy and competence was significantly correlated with the evaluation of how good a day was.

In addition, Ryan et al. (1996) stated that needs for financial success, social recognition, and physical attractiveness were predicted by having controlling, cold, and uninvolved parents. Conversely, the pursuit of intrinsic goals was predicted by having autonomy granting, warm, and involved parents. One of the most notable contributions by Ryan and his colleagues is that this line of study provided insight into the early developmental genesis of SWB. Although Tellegen et al. (1988) found that about 50% of SWB can be attributed to genetics, Ryan et al. (1996) suggest that child rearing may illuminate some of the unexplained variance. Moreover, Ryan et al.'s findings have an important implication for intra-individual variation of SWB. That is, whereas person A may never be as happy as person B, due to genetic predispositions to negative affectivity, person A may be able to feel happier than otherwise through the pursuit of intrinsic goals. It is critical to note that the findings from the traditional trait and genetic approaches account only for inter-individual differences, and therefore do not verify that the level of SWB attained by each individual is predetermined. In other words, Ryan et al. suggest that the degree to which individuals fulfill their potential and attain maximum happiness depends heavily on the successful pursuit of intrinsic goals. Understanding of intra-individual variation might, therefore, be most likely to be
gained through careful analyses of goal contents as well as goal pursuit behaviors.

It is in the area of goals and values that SWB transcends the boundaries of hedonism (Emmons, 1996; Ryan et al. 1996). One objection to using SWB as a
criterion for mental health is that a person might live an immoral life and
nevertheless be happy (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). When one finds, however, that SWB
is at least partially dependent on fulfilling one's goals, which in turn are related to
one's values, SWB becomes defensible as an essential ingredient of the good life.
If an individual's SWB depends on engaging in activities that are congruent with
his or her values, then SWB cannot be thought of as a simple form of hedonism
that follows only from bodily pleasures. Instead, SWB, especially life satisfaction,
is likely to reflect the person's fulfillment of his or her values and goals, and
involve the search for meaningfulness in one's life. Thus, SWB becomes a broader
measure of quality of life because it reflects deeper values beyond physical
pleasure and ephemeral emotions.

It appears that people's SWB is to some degree related to their fulfillment of their
values. To the extent that this is true, value-based quality of life and SWB merge.
The ideal society socializes its citizens to cherish certain values. In such a society,
the citizens are likely to achieve SWB by working toward those values.

**Flow and Subjective Well-Being**

An approach related to goal models is the hypothesis that SWB depends on being
involved in interesting activities. The idea is that humans are constructed, because
of their large brains and reliance on knowledge for survival, so that interest (versus
boredom) is a very compelling motivation. Interesting activities are those in which
there is a balance between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Such
activities are pleasant because they provide an optimal level of new information
that is novel, yet not overwhelming. Thus, an activity is boring if it requires too
little skill and is stressful if it requires advanced skills that the person does not
possess. On the other hand, the activity can produce the highly pleasurable
experience of "flow" if the challenge of the activity is equivalent to the amount of
skill the person possesses.

In the work arena, occupational satisfaction is a predictor of life satisfaction.
Activity theory provides a partial explanation for this outcome because work can
be interesting and therefore enhance SWB. Activity theory points to the fact that
interesting activities can supplement the pleasures that are achieved through
people's emotions and physical comforts.

**Conclusions**

Subjective well-being is a rapidly growing research and applied area. Measures of
SWB appear to have adequate validity to allow progress in the area. Subjective
well-being is on average positive in industrialized nations, though people do differ
in their levels of pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, and life satisfaction. Several
potential causes of the individual differences in SWB have been explored, and
temperament looms as an important influence. People's goals, cognitive styles, and
activities are also likely influences of SWB. External circumstances are often less
important to SWB than is often believed, probably because people partially adapt to them. Nevertheless, extreme situational differences such as that between life in the wealthiest and poorest nations do appear to affect SWB. Values are related to positive SWB in that people who are involved in goal activities that they believe are important are more likely to experience feelings of well-being.

Subjective well-being is a new field of research that focuses on understanding the complete range of well-being from utter despair, to elation and total life satisfaction. Most people in surveys around the world report predominantly positive feelings (Diener & C. Diener, 1996), although this varies according to the wealth of the nation. Because most people are not depressed most of the time, it makes sense to study positive forms of well-being, not just the absence of well-being. When we examine the entire range of well-being, we obtain hints about factors that can increase quality of life. As people come to meet their basic physical needs, they will increasingly turn to concerns about quality of life. If psychologists are to meaningfully contribute to public discussions about quality of life, they must understand SWB through theory and research in this area.

References


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