

Well-being and welfare under the UK Coalition: happiness is not enough

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'Senior advisors to the prime minister are drawing up a set of indicators that will include whether ... policy will increase, 'the sum total of human happiness', or make people feel miserable and unfulfilled' (Sunday Times, 13.03.2011).

Introduction

Happiness has long been of interest to politicians and policy-makers but it gained significance with the election of the UK Coalition Government in 2010. Inspired by the French Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz et al., 2008), the Government tasked the Office of National Statistics (ONS) with developing a set of well-being indices that would allow the measurement of 'how well we are doing as a nation' (as a counterbalance to GDP measures) and would enable comparison between the UK and other countries. The ONS eventually settled on four questions to measure subjective personal well-being related to happiness and overall life-satisfaction in the Annual Population Survey (APS) and a broader index with 41 questions from a variety of data sets that measure both subjective and objective well-being (ONS, 2014).

The ONS states, 'Developing better measures of well-being and progress is a common international goal ... Within the UK there is a commitment to developing wider measures of well-being so that government policies can be more tailored to the things that matter ... Wider and systematic consideration of well-being has the potential to lead to better decisions by government, markets and the public and as such better outcomes' (ONS, 2014).

Happiness is not enough

Debate about the meaning of subjective well-being has been dominated by positive psychology and behavioural economics in recent times with their focus on individual experience and behaviour. At the same time, popular political imagination has been preoccupied with the idea of individual happiness as a basis for national well-being.

Looking beyond happiness, positive emotions, life-satisfaction and flourishing have come to be regarded by some as the yardstick of subjective well-being. Seeking to flourish, however, is typically seen as the product of individual actions without an examination of social context. As Greco and Stenner have argued, this failure splits 'the subject from their world ... treating feelings and desires as purely internal, individual and subjective affairs ... effectively cutting people off from any of their powers that do not correspond to a limited mode of entrepreneurial subjectivity and practice' (Stenner and Greco, 2013: 106). Such approaches de-socialize the self-reporting individual and divorce subjective well-being from objective well-being – the conditions which may be necessary in order to be well.

In order to grasp national well-being, individual self-reports are aggregated up to form a larger picture – an approach which is firmly methodologically individualist and cannot grasp collective or shared senses of well-being among national or other communities. Importantly, it also says nothing about how the well-being of some stands *in relation to* the well-being of others (other than as different rates between statistical aggregates) and how it may be an outcome of the *quality of that relationship*.

Martha Nussbaum has also argued that single questions such as 'how satisfied are you with your life as a whole' ask respondents to aggregate their own feelings in unrealistic ways. 'There is no opportunity for them to answer something plausible, such as 'well, my health is good, and my work is going well, but I am very upset about the state of the economy, and one of my friends is very ill' (Nussbaum, 2012: 329).

A parallel problem with approaches influenced by positive psychology is that negative emotions are only seen as detrimental to well-being and to be overcome in favour of positive emotions. That life is a complex set of positive and negative internal emotions played out with others in social relationships is not considered. As Daniel Kahneman has recently said there is also the problem of reinterpretation of experience and emotion. How we experience our lives and how we remember those experiences are very different things. Reflections on overall life-satisfaction by the 'remembering self' may reinterpret past experiences often putting positive or negative interpretations on events which were experienced quite differently at the time by the 'experiencing self' (Kahneman, 2015). Remembering for the purposes of survey response, may take this form, but also takes place as an isolated individual act without the benefit of interpretive discussion with others, whereas experience is socially situated in relation to others, their experiences and, in this case, their well-being.

So we should be very wary of taking aggregate accounts of individually self-reported happiness or life-satisfaction as meaningful accounts of national well-being. That said, what do early findings from the ONS indicate about national well-being so conceived, and how valuable are they for social policy and for the future of welfare?

The ONS organises its 41 measures of National well-being, 'into ten 'domains' including topics such as 'Health', 'What we do' and 'Where we live'. The measures include both objective data (for example, the unemployment rate) and subjective data (for example, percentage who felt safe walking alone after dark) ... in order to

compare UK well-being with European Union countries the ONS uses similar European data where available from five sources: Eurostat, the European Quality of Life Survey, Eurobarometer, the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) and the World Gallup Poll' (ONS, 2014).

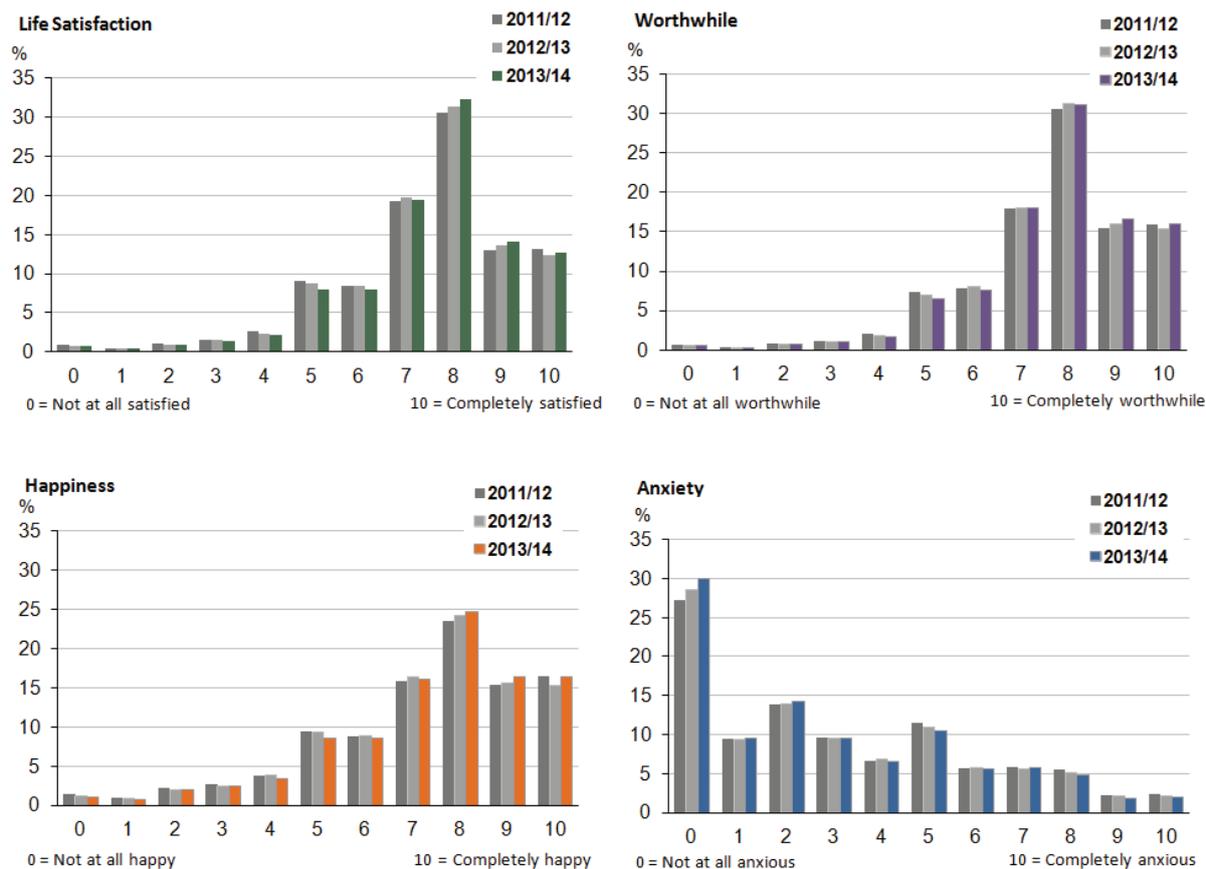
Recent key comparative findings include:

- In 2011, 71.8% of adults aged 16 and over in the UK rated their life satisfaction as 7 or more out of 10, higher than the EU-28 average of 69.3%.
- The average rating of satisfaction with family life by people aged 16 and over in the UK in 2011 was 8.2 out of 10, higher than the EU-28 average of 7.8 out of 10.
- Over 6 in 10 people (62.7%) aged 16 and over in the UK rated their health status as very good or good in 2011, lower than the EU-28 average of 64.0%.
- In 2011, 58.4% of people aged 16 and over in the UK reported that they felt close to other people in the area where they lived, lower than the EU-28 average of 66.6%.
- A fifth (20.2%) of households in the UK in 2012 reported great difficulty or difficulty in making ends meet, lower than the estimated EU-28 average of 27.7%.
- In 2013, 79% of adults aged 15 and over in the UK scored very high, high or medium on an index of cultural practice (measuring frequency of cultural participation), higher than the EU-27 average of 66% (Source: ONS, 2014).

On a range of accounts UK respondents' rate above the EU 28 average but on some, such as health and feeling close to other people in the area, they rate below.

Looking at the four life-satisfaction measures over time in the UK there has been a slight and continued rise since 2011 in self-reported sat-

Distribution of personal well-being ratings, United Kingdom, 2011/12 – 2013/14



Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) – Office for National Statistics, Statistical Bulletin (2014)

isfaction and decline in reported anxiety (see tables below).

This apparent increase in life-satisfaction during a period of financial crisis, austerity and attacks on welfare provision may seem surprising and rather limited. As Deeming (2013: 543) points out, 'to date, ONS reports have largely been descriptive, showing basic cross-tabulations and average estimates of SWB for different sections of the population ... Their findings do not reveal with any degree of certainty which sections of the British population are particularly vulnerable to experiencing low levels of SWB. Yet we know from the international research literature that a range of socio-demographics can help to explain well-being'. However, we can, as Deeming attempts with more sophisticated regression analyses, show correlations between the different 'social determinants' of well-being.

Deeming's analysis shows, 'that well-being is not evenly distributed within the UK. Socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, employment, household composition and tenure all matter, as does health status and self-reported indicators' (Deeming, 2013: 541).

It is far cry from here, however, to show causal links between specific policy decisions and happiness or life-satisfaction outcomes. It is an even harder to suggest that where direct links have been established they have in fact influenced policy-making to improve well-being in the way the ONS suggests they might.

Yet we already know from many sources that there are general social characteristics that are associated with collective well-being. Marmot (2010) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) already showed the correlation between social inequal-

ities and worse levels of health and many other social determinants of well-being. A key issue here is that inequality is a distributional *relationship*. It is also, generated in the context of unequal power relations. This relational analysis of well-being is missing from much of the recent literature and goes to the heart of debates about how to improve social as opposed to statistically aggregate national well-being.

Conclusion

Attention to the quality of relationships should be at the heart of policy decisions concerned with well-being. Abse, for example, has argued for a more relational approach to family policy: 'Emotional health and the strength of people's relationships, whether these be intimate or familial or within communities is closely correlated. If governments fail to create the conditions that promote nurturing families, the capacity for healthy interpersonal relationships is harmed. This has political as well as personal consequences because good relationships are fundamental to the development of communities based on reciprocity, tolerance and cooperation' (Abse, 2014). And as the authors of *The Relational State* argue, there is a 'need for human relationships to be given greater priority as a goal of policy and in the design and operation of public services' (Cooke and Muir, 2012: 8).

The quality of personal and social relationships must be at the heart of any future social policy. Provision to meet certain objective conditions for well-being, such as income up to a certain level, is crucial, but we know that beyond a certain level it is the quality of the experience of those conditions e.g. the relative position of a person's income in relation to others or the type of employment and the quality of that employment, that has the most effect on well-being. As Deeming (2013: 561) concludes, 'The value of social policy is that it recognises the plurality of human ends and needs (not just ideas relating to 'happiness' or SWB), and as such it invokes our social values and principles for thinking about resources, material circumstances, and their distributions'.

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