



Children's subjective well-being: International comparative perspectives

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ABSTRACT

We are enjoined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to take account of the views of children. One way this can be done is by asking children about their lives in sample surveys. This paper is a comparison of the results obtained to sample survey questions on subjective well-being of children at two contrasting levels of analysis—international macro (European Union 29) and national level micro (England). At both levels, children's well-being is accessed in terms of three subjective domains: (1) personal well-being, (2) relational well-being, and (3) well-being at school. At the micro level we also explore neighbourhood well-being.

The results show that at the macro level personal well-being is associated with the material and housing circumstances but not family relationships or family structure. Well-being at school is not associated with any variable. Subjective health is only associated with family structure. At the micro level, although many of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of children are found to be associated with their well-being in the four domains, these factors explain only a small amount of the variation in these well-being domains.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “the primary consideration in all actions concerning children must be in their best interest and their views must be taken into account”. Influenced by that injunction attempts have been made to collect data through multi-national surveys on what children say about themselves—what they think and feel. The results of these surveys have been fed into multidimensional indices which attempt to compare the well-being of children between countries and between children in different circumstances within countries.

We have produced comparative studies of child well-being for the European Union's 25 member states (EU25), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Central and Eastern European and the Commonwealth of Independent states (CEE/CIS) countries (Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2007; UNICEF, 2007; Richardson, Hoelscher & Bradshaw, 2008) and each has contained data on what children think and feel derived from answers they provide in surveys. We have been struck in this work by how little association there is between these subjective indicators of well-being and how little association there is between them and other

indicators of well-being. In the first part of this article we explore this using the results of the most recent index of child well-being in the EU29 countries (Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009).

We have also explored subjective well-being in Britain using the youth survey of the British Household Panel Survey which contains measures of happiness, troubled feeling and self esteem of young people aged 11–15 (Bergman & Scott, 2001; Clarke et al. 2000; Quilgars et al. 2005; Keung, 2006a; Keung, 2006b). We were also struck in this work with how little variation in these measures of subjective well-being could be explained by the social and economic circumstances of the young people and their families. We found that subjective well-being tended to be worse for girls than boys and be lower as children got older, but apart from that there seemed to be very few other significant correlates other than the relationship with their parents, which may not be independent of their well-being. In the second part of this article we explore this issue using data derived from a new school based survey of 11,000 young people aged 14–16. In the final part, we discuss the findings of these two very different sources of data and some methodological issues. First we start with a brief review of subjective well-being.

1.1.1. Subjective well-being

According to Diener (2000) and Ben-Zur (2003) subjective well-being is a multidimensional construct that includes both affective and cognitive components. These include the experiences of pleasant emotions (positive affect), the experiences of negative emotions such as distress and dissatisfaction (negative affect) and judgement of

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individuals' life qualities (overall life satisfaction or satisfaction with a specific domain). Ben-Zur (2003) found that positive and negative affect were distinct and though weakly associated were not bipolar opposites. Bradburn (1969) found 'happiness' was the result of a balance between positive and negative affect. Satisfaction is a judgement made by individuals based on a long term assessment of their lives, while happiness is influenced by one's immediate pleasant and unpleasant experiences (Andrews & Withey, 1976, Keyes et al., 2002). According to Diener and Lucas (1998) personality traits have a large influence on subjective well-being and this helps to explain its stability.

According to Diner et al. (1999) there have been two approaches to the exploration of correlates of subjective well-being. First the bottom-up approach is built on the view that subjective well-being is influenced by individuals demographic and other objective circumstances. It includes the work referred to earlier using the British Household Panel Survey. The bottom-up approach has been challenged by these and other findings that objective life conditions and circumstances only explain a small proportion of the variance in subjective well-being (see also Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976).

The shortcomings of the bottom-up approach and the emergence of behavioural genetic data, as well as studies on the long-term stability of subjective well-being, have shifted the research interest toward a top-down approach (Heller et al., 2004). Research evidence consistently shows that personality is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999). Perhaps most striking is the finding of twin studies that concluded that genetics accounted for approximately 40% of the variation in positive affect, 55% of the variation in negative affects and 48% of the variation in life satisfaction (Tellegen et al., 1988).

For policy makers, parents, teachers and others who are concerned with child well-being these are rather depressing conclusions. What can they do to influence child well-being if it is mainly or almost entirely determined by genes and personality traits? However several studies also show that broad environmental circumstances can sometimes produce substantial and lasting differences in subjective well-being. For instance, there are huge differences in SWB between different nations (Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000; Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995). This suggests that different life circumstances can dramatically influence subjective well-being. From this example, Diener et al. (1995) conclude that traits may be a better predictor of subjective well-being for people with similar backgrounds but not for people who are from different nations, or different cultures. In the latter cases, environmental effects are likely to explain more of the differences in individuals' subjective well-being. In the same vein, White (2008) also identified 'culture' as a key influence on the way one's perception of well-being is constructed and suggested that well-being should be understood as a 'process' and which should be grounded in a specific 'time' and 'place'.

Thus, it appears that well-being could be a result of the dynamic interactions between the top-down (e.g. personality traits) and bottom-up (objective circumstances) factors, and these interactions (or processes) vary according to a specific time and place. The concept of 'time' in particular is deemed relevant for our understanding of well-being as White (2008) points out that people's understanding of their own well-being changes through their life-cycle and that their reflections on the past and expectations of the future all could affect how people see their present well-being. Thus, the concept of 'time' provides a reference point to individuals regarding how they perceive themselves in the present. The concept of 'place' is also important for our understanding of well-being as it provides a scope for comparisons. For example, according to Layard¹, it is not the actual income

level that matters to individuals but how they stand relative to others. Thus, what it suggests is that well-being would be better understood within a particular 'place' (or context) where such comparisons take place.

White's (2008) research looked into factors that are important to well-being from the perspective of a developing country. According to White (2008) well-being is formulated by three interdependent dimensions, namely the 'subjective', 'material' and 'relational'. The subjective dimension refers to 'values, perceptions and experience' of individuals; the material dimension refers to the 'practical welfare and standards of living' and finally, the 'relational' dimension refers to 'personal and social relations'. White (2008) argues that the relative importance of these dimensions that define individuals' well-being is likely to change in different 'time' and 'place'. These perceptions of well-being, perhaps, represent the most basic elements of human well-being, in which case they might help us to understand what truly matters to our well-being.

1.1.2. Macro analysis: child well-being in the EU29

The child well-being index (Bradshaw & Richardson 2009) covers the 27 member countries of the European Union plus Norway and Iceland. 43 indicators were derived from surveys and international statistical series and combined to form seven domains of well-being: health; subjective well-being; children's relationships; material well-being; risk and safety; education; and housing and the environment. Detailed discussion on how these indicators were constructed can be referred to Bradshaw and Richardson (2009). In this article we focus on

1. Three indicators of subjective well-being

- Personal well-being: % 11, 13 and 15 year olds who report high life satisfaction—scoring 7 or more on Cantrill's ladder (2005/06)
- Well-being at school: % 11, 13 and 15 year olds liking school a lot (2005/06)
- Self-defined (subjective) health: % 11, 13 and 15 year olds who rate their health as fair or poor (2005/06)

2. Two indicators of children's relational well-being, defined by

- % 11, 13 and 15 year olds who find it easy to talk to their mother (2005/06)
- % 11, 13 and 15 year olds who agree that their classmates are kind and helpful (2005/06)

All the above indicators are derived from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey (Currie et al, 2008)².

3. Three contextual indicators

- Level of deprivation in a country: % households with children with an enforced lack of consumer durables³
- Poor housing: % households with children reporting more than one housing problems⁴
- Family structure: % 11, 13 and 15 year olds living in a lone parent household

² The HBSC data is aggregated using published results for 11, 13 and 15 year olds and girls and boys separately. In order to produce a single national aggregate figure, the results are weighted by sample numbers for age and gender. Data for the UK is GB only. Samples for England, Scotland and Wales are weighted by the child population figures. Belgian data is an aggregate of Flemish and French results weighted for child population figures.

³ An enforced lack of consumer durables refers to people who cannot afford to have a washing machine, Colour TV, Telephone a personal computer or a personal car (a similar indicator is used by European Commission, (2008: 51)—we include a personal computer). The indicator is one or more of these items missing. Households with children are households with any number of residents aged 0–17.

⁴ One or more of leaking roof, damp walls / floors / foundations, or rot in the window frames. Accommodation too dark, no bath or shower, no indoor flushing toilet for sole use of the household (European Commission, 2008: 51). Households with children are households with any number of residents aged 0–17.

¹ With reference to the transcript of the keynote seminar of the all-party parliamentary group on scientific research in learning and education: 'well-being in the classroom'. Portcullis House, 23 Oct 2007.

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