



Hunger and the Experience of Being Well: Absolute and Relative Concerns

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Summary. — The lessening of hunger is central to the development agenda; however, there is little research on how it ends up impacting on people's experience of being well. Research on this impact is crucial for the design of hunger alleviation programs as well as for the measurement and understanding of hunger. It is also important to understand people's motivation and reaction to interventions. This paper studies the impact of hunger on four different experiences of being well: evaluative, positive affects, negative affects, and sensory. The paper distinguishes between absolute and relative effects of hunger on people's well-being. Information from the Gallup World Poll 2006 for 88 countries in the world is used to quantitatively study the well-being relevance of hunger. It is found that hunger is highly detrimental to people's well-being, which provides a justification for making substantial efforts to alleviate it. In addition, relative effects are important in the evaluative and negative-affect experiences; which means that hunger alleviation programs do not only impact positively on the well-being of those benefiting from the programs but also negatively on the well-being of those who—out of different reasons—are left behind. Thus, counting success on the number of people who are getting out of hunger does not provide the complete well-being picture, because those who are left behind may also be negatively affected by these programs. In consequence, in order to enhance their well-being impact it is important for hunger alleviation programs to be broadly inclusive, aiming not to leave anybody behind.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The alleviation of hunger is a major policy concern; it also constitutes an important area for multidisciplinary research (e.g., Clark & Taylor, 2001; Devereux, 2001; Khandker, Khalily, & Samad, 2012; Svedberg, 2002; te Lintelo & Lakshman, 2015). It is widely accepted—even as a self-evident truth—that hunger depresses people's well-being both in the present and in the future. The negative association between hunger and people's well-being makes of hunger alleviation a central goal for international organizations and national governments. “Zero hunger” constitutes the second goal in the Sustainable Development Goals initiative; there is agreement in considering access to adequate food as a basic human right.

There is no doubt that hunger alleviation is a central goal; attaining this goal in an efficient way requires a complete understanding of how people experience hunger. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between hunger and people's well-being. It follows a subjective well-being approach in order to understand how hunger relates to the experiences of being well people do have. The paper deals with four main issues which have both theoretical relevance and policy implications.

First, this paper estimates the well-being impact of hunger and contrasts it with other relevant life events. Even if there is little doubt about the existence of a negative association between hunger and people's experience of being well, it is still of relevance to know its magnitude. Policy makers face trade-offs in the allocation of scarce resources and it is important to know the well-being impact of hunger alleviation programs. In this sense, this paper goes beyond previous research studying the relationship of hunger and subjective well-being (Bertoni, 2015; Guardiola & Rojas, 2015; Howard & Millard, 1997;

Siefert, Heflin, Corcoran, & Williams, 2004; Weaver & Hadley, 2009).

Second, this paper studies the impact of hunger on four kinds of experiences of being well: evaluative, positive affects, negative affects, and sensory. There is some previous research about the association of hunger to sensory experiences of pain and fatigue (Weaver & Hadley, 2009) and to affective and evaluative experiences (Kaplan, Crawford, Field, & Simpson, 2007; Lappé, Collins, & Rosset, 1998); however, previous research does not provide an integral view of the relationship between hunger and well-being.

Third, there is no research regarding the role social context plays in the relationship between hunger and well-being. It is commonly assumed that a person's well-being emerges from the direct satisfaction of her hunger, and little consideration is given to the social context in which this satisfaction takes place. Is it the same to experience hunger in a social context of generalized hunger than in a context of isolated hunger? The paper distinguishes between absolute and relative effects and finds that the impact of hunger on people's well-being is not independent of other people's hunger (the social context).

Fourth, different methodologies do exist to measure hunger and they may lead to substantial differences in the identification of those people who are in hunger as well as in the computation of hunger statistics (Barrett, 2010; Masset, 2011; Svedberg, 2002). The subjective well-being approach may contribute to fully understand the well-being consequences of following different methodologies in the measurement of hunger. The paper distinguishes between those who are in hunger because of income constraints and those who are in hunger because of other reasons, and it shows that there are differences between these two groups.

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The empirical study uses information from the Gallup World Poll. There is useful information for 88 countries, with more than 80,000 valid observations in the econometric exercises.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on subjective well-being and hunger; special attention is given to the effect of hunger on essential experiences of being well, as well as to the existence of absolute and relative concerns. Section 3 introduces the dataset and presents the variables used in the empirical analyses. Section 4 studies the impact of hunger on four experiences of being well: evaluative, positive affects, negative affects, and sensory. Section 5 studies the existence of relative and absolute concerns in the relationship of hunger and people's well-being. Section 6 deals with issues in measuring hunger. Final considerations are presented in Section 7.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

(a) *The subjective well-being approach*

The subjective well-being approach understands well-being as the experience people have of being well. It is in human condition to experience well-being, and human beings are able of recognizing different kinds of well-being experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Rojas & Veenhoven, 2013; Veenhoven, 2009). Four kinds of experiences are well documented: First, sensory experiences associated to pain and pleasure. Second, affective experiences related to emotions and moods; experts classify these affective experiences in terms of positive and negative affects. Third, evaluative experiences of achievements and failures in life; people have these experiences on the basis of the attainment of their own goals and aspirations. Fourth, flow states which emerge from fully absorbing and energizing episodes. These experiences may take place in different intensities and durations.

A particular event may trigger all kinds of experiences, and not always in reinforcing ways. Some events may be associated to an evaluative experience of achievement but to an affective experience of suffering; other events may imply a sensory experience of pleasure but an evaluative experience of failure—such is the case, for example, of a person who is eating a chocolate cake while being on a strict diet.

The subjective well-being approach also recognizes that people are able of making a synthesis on the basis of these essential experiences of being well; this synthesis may be expressed in terms of being satisfied with life (Argyle, 2002). The recognition that every person is in a privileged position to judge and report her experience of being well is a central feature in the approach; hence, the best way of knowing people's well-being is by directly asking them.

The approach states that well-being is inherently subjective because the person is indispensable for the experience to take place; in other words, the experience of being well cannot be detached from the person who is experiencing it (Sumner, 1995, 1996). In consequence, well-being is not an academic construct but an experience people have; thus, it is not something to be defined by experts but to be studied by them.

(b) *Absolute and relative concerns in the experience of being well*

Does the experience of being well depend on the absolute situation of the person or on her relative standing? Classical economists did highlight the role played by a person's relative position; for example, Smith (1937) and Keynes (1931) stressed the distinction between absolute and relative needs, while Marx

(1977) emphasized the importance of human comparisons. Sociologists believe that comparisons and social positions play an important role in determining evaluation norms (Suls & Wills, 1991; Weber, 1922), and earlier sociologists addressed the issue of who do people compare with and what kind of comparisons they do make (Hyman, 1960; Merton & Kitt, 1950; Runciman, 1966). There is a longstanding tradition in social science stressing the importance other people play in explaining people's behavior and also their well-being (Parducci, 1968, 1995). However, lack of empirical research led to the predominance of an individualistic perspective in the understanding of people's well-being; this is: well-being was primarily understood as emerging from a relationship between the person and her possessions—the absolute situation.

Easterlin (1974) constitutes the first empirical exploration of the role relative income may play in people's well-being. Many subsequent studies do find that relative income does have a significant influence on people's well-being (Clark & Oswald, 1996). It is now widely accepted that there are relative and absolute concerns in the relationship between income and people's well-being; current research centers in the assessment of their importance and on methodological considerations regarding the nature of comparisons (Clark, 2007; Frank, 1985, 1989; van Praag, Kapteyn, & van Herwaarden, 1979). Researchers have followed different strategies in the definition of the reference group, for example: people in the same region (Luttmer, 2005; Stutzer, 2004), people in the same professional or occupational group (Senik, 2004, 2007), same socio-demographic group (Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; McBride, 2001) and even same ethnic group (Kingdon & Knight, 2007).

The importance of relative concerns is not constrained to income comparisons. Graham and Felton (2005) provide an interesting study regarding obesity comparisons. Marmot (2004) shows that health and life expectancy are related to a person's relative standing in society. Mazur and Lamb (1980) show that status is related to specific biological activity in human males, while Brosnan and de Waal (2003) show that even primates react to relative rewards. It is reasonable for relative concerns to be entrenched in human evolution.

(c) *Hunger and its understanding*

According to the Oxford dictionary (Oxford, 2015) there are three possible definitions of hunger: First, hunger is: “*A feeling of discomfort or weakness caused by lack of food, coupled with the desire to eat*”. Second, hunger is “*a strong desire or craving for food*”. Third, hunger is “*a severe lack of food*”. The first and second definitions associate hunger to a direct experience people have, while the third definition associates hunger to the concept of food security (FAO, 2002; Maxwell, Caldwell, & Langworthy, 2008; Maxwell & Frankenberger, 1992). While the first and second definitions are closely associated to experiences people have the third definition is based on the satisfier—food, which is presumed to be desired by people and to have a positive impact on their well-being.

The causes of hunger are complex and sometimes interdependent. Sen (1981, 1984) makes the case for an entitlements argument; according to which famines are explained by the failure of entitlements rather than by the decline in food availability. However, Devereux (2001) argues that it is the decline in food availability which plays an important role in explaining the existence of hunger. Researchers usually consider four different aspects in studying people's access to food: growing food, buying food, working for food, and receiving food from others (Devereux, 2001; Sen, 1981). Failure in any of these aspects becomes a possible cause for the existence of hunger.

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