

**Subjective Well-Being Is Desirable,
But Not the Summum Bonum**

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<u>Index</u>	<u>Page</u>
Abstract	3
I. Defining and Measuring Subjective Well-Being	4
II. Is Subjective Well-Being the Summum Bonum	7
III. Valuing Happiness	7
IV. Causes and Correlates of SWB	8
A. Goals	8
B. Temperament and personality	8
C. Quality social relationships	9
D. Basic need fulfillment	9
E. Health	10
F. Demographics	10
G. Resources	11
H. Culture	11
I. Income	12
J. Comparison standards	12
V. Most People Are Happy	13
VI. The Consequences of SWB	13
VII. Does SWB Define the Good Society?	14
VIII. Dynamics of the Mood and Emotion System	15
IX. Optimal Levels of SWB, and Interventions to Increase It	16
X. Conclusions	16
References	18
Table 1: Life satisfaction of selected groups	19
Table 2: Importance ratings of happiness and other values	20

Abstract

Subjective well-being is a broad term that encompasses the various ways people evaluate their lives, including concepts such as life satisfaction, pleasant emotions, satisfaction with domains such as work and health, feelings of fulfillment and meaning, and low levels of unpleasant emotions. Subjective well-being (SWB) is one component of the good life because lives that are bereft of joy, affection, feelings of fulfillment and meaning, and laden with dissatisfaction, anger, and depression cannot be thought of as ideal, no matter how many other good qualities might be present. On the other hand, we argue that subjective well-being is not the sufficient and final good for which people strive, and to which all other desirable objects are merely a means. People want to be happy, but for the right reasons, and they want certain valued things even in the absence of feelings of happiness. Thus, we argue that subjective well-being is only one of several valued ends that comprise the good life. Social scientists have developed some understanding based on empirical studies of what leads people to evaluate their lives in positive terms. In very recent years, there has also been an analysis of the outcomes of subjective well-being, with the tentative finding that happiness helps people to be successful in some life tasks such as social relationships and earning money. However, there might be optimal levels of certain forms of SWB, such as pleasant emotions, that are only functional when in the long-term they are at submaximal levels – that is, SWB is likely to be dysfunctional if a person is locked into a state of intense positive emotions, and is not able to react to good and bad events. A challenge for future research is to determine whether it is possible to produce interventions to heighten happiness, which at the same time allow people to function effectively in the pursuit of valued social goals.

Subjective Well-Being is Desirable, But Not the Summum Bonum

Defining and Measuring Subjective Well-Being

Major reviews of the area of subjective well-being can be found in Diener (1984), Diener et al. (1999), and Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz (1999).

Subjective well-being is people's subjective evaluations of their lives, and includes concepts such as life satisfaction, pleasant emotions, feelings of fulfillment, satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work, and low levels of unpleasant emotions. Thus, subjective well-being (SWB) is an umbrella term that includes a variety of related concepts that all pertain to how people feel and think about their lives. Whether emotions or cognitions, all forms of SWB represent the person's evaluation of his or her life, whether at the moment or across time. Although "happiness" and subjective well-being are used somewhat interchangeably, subjective well-being is the preferred term by researchers working in this field because the word "happiness" has varied meanings, ranging from a pleasant current mood to quality of life.

As an example of SWB, Table 1 shows the average life satisfaction scores of selected groups. As can be seen, the richest Americans are at the top of this list. However, not far behind are the Maasai, a pastoral people in East Africa – a group with very few material comforts. It can be seen that the groups populating the dissatisfied range are people who are stigmatized in society, and often people who have substantial personal problems. Although material resources might to some degree contribute to life satisfaction, it appears that factors such as respect and good social relationships are more important.

One issue that researchers have analyzed is the number of dimensions or components that are needed to characterize people's evaluations of their lives. For example, a debate has raged about whether positive and negative emotions are independent, or are simply opposite ends of one continuum. Many researchers believe that the two should be assessed separately because they often correlate with different variables. Some psychologists such as Martin E. P. Seligman have carefully distinguished between feelings of meaning, pleasure (including happy emotions), and engagement (interest and "flow"). Those from a humanistic tradition (Deci and Ryan; Carol Ryff) include variables such as feelings of competence, autonomy, growth, social connectedness, and purpose in their definitions of well-being. We include all these concepts under the broad label of Subjective Well-Being, although most research in the field has been focused on life satisfaction and pleasant emotions. It is an empirical question whether the various forms of SWB show similar or different patterns.

A core component of SWB is people's affect, which includes their pleasant and unpleasant moods and emotions. People react with pleasant emotions when things they

perceive as good happen to them, and react with unpleasant emotions when things they perceive as bad happen to them. Thus, the moods and emotions are not only pleasurable or unpleasurable, but also provide an indicator of whether an event is perceived by the individual as desirable or not. One issue regarding affect and SWB is whether frequent pleasant emotions or intense ones are more critical to long-term feelings of well-being. We have argued that global reports of happiness depend more on how much of the time people feel pleasant emotions than they do on whether the person feels intensely positive. For instance, some individuals report high levels of happiness even though they are only slightly to moderately happy much of the time.

Besides making global judgments about their lives, respondents can evaluate specific parts of their lives such as their marriage, work, leisure, or health. Even though a person is generally satisfied with her life, she might not be satisfied with specific components of her life such as her marriage or job. Conversely, a person who is generally dissatisfied might be very satisfied with certain aspects of his life. We have found that more concrete and narrow satisfaction ratings are less likely to be influenced by people's general positivity, and therefore are more strongly linked to actual life circumstances. In contrast, broad domains tend to correlate more with global life satisfaction because both are influenced by a general positive disposition. Thus, life circumstances are more likely to be tied to satisfaction with that specific area of life than they are tied to global life satisfaction.

It is not yet entirely clear how these many different SWB variables all relate to one another. For example, Laura King has found that feelings of meaningfulness are correlated with positive moods, suggesting that the two are not entirely independent. People think of tasks as meaningful when they are in a pleasant mood. Much research has been conducted on how life satisfaction judgments are constructed, and the information that people consider when making such judgments. Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack have shown that momentary factors such as current mood and the salience of information from earlier items in the survey can influence life satisfaction judgments. Ulrich Schimmack and Shige Oishi have studied some of the chronic factors that people use in making life satisfaction judgments. For example, people use their recent affect balance (amount of pleasant minus unpleasant feelings) in reporting their life satisfaction, but use other information as well that depends on their values and personalities. Eunkook Suh has explored cultural differences in the information people use when making life satisfaction judgments. Oishi and Schimmack found that certain people use "excitement" more in making life satisfaction judgments than do other people, but also that people use "excitement" more in certain contexts.

Substantial research has been focused on developing and validating measures of subjective well-being. Often the SWB measures are simple self-report responses in interviews, or questionnaires of how happy or satisfied the person feels. For example, people might use a 1 to 7 scale to report how happy or satisfied they are. Although issues about measurement problems and error are evident when such measures are employed, the SWB scales have shown some degree of validity. Thus, they are used in large-scale surveys where better measures would be impossible.

Additional types of SWB measures are sometimes used when time and resources permit. The additional measures help validate the findings of the self-report survey measures, and also provide converging evidence about the conclusions of SWB research. For example, in our laboratory we use the experience sampling method that was invented by Csikszentmihalyi, which entails signaling people at random moments and obtaining a record of their feelings and activities at the moment. By aggregating across many occasions we obtain a record of feelings that is less contaminated by memory biases than are the global survey scales. Another method we have used to assess subjective well-being is to ask subjects to generate as many good life events as they can in a short time period, and then to do the same for negative events. By examining the difference in recall between good and bad events we obtain a measure of the recall “availability” of good and bad life events in the respondent’s life, and we use this as another measure of SWB. Additional measures of SWB include: interviews with respondents, biological measures (e.g., measures of stress hormones or cardiac variability), informant reports from family and friends, and coding of facial expressions.

We have developed a model of SWB measures that differentiate types of assessment along the time dimension. Some measures record reactions “on-line” as they are occurring. Other measures record memories for past moods and emotions over some specified period of time, such as the past month. And yet other measures ask for global judgments of life as a whole. We have now learned some of the processes that transform each of these measures into the next one in the temporal sequence. For instance, retrospective reports of feelings do depend on actual on-line feelings to some degree – people can to some extent remember how they actually felt – but also depend on factors such as self-concept and expectancies. The differences between the measures along the temporal sequence reveal that “happiness” is not a single monolithic entity, but is composed of separable components.

One issue that has concerned investigators of SWB is whether on-line experiences or retrospective recall of feelings represent true happiness. For example, Kahneman has argued that in some sense we only have immediate experience of pleasure, and that for memories to matter, they must be recalled and influence pleasure at the moment. In contrast, one might argue that the vast majority of our life is only available to us in memory, and that our current experience represents only a tiny slice in time. Furthermore, it can be argued that people base their decisions about the future not only on their current moods, but also on their recall of previous experiences. Derrick Wirtz in our laboratory and Shige Oishi have both shown that the effect of on-line experience on future behavior is mediated by recall, and that expectations about experiences influence memories about them. These findings indicate that both on-line experiences and recall of them, although not identical, are both important. One implication of the findings reviewed in this section is that “happiness” is not a single entity, but is composed of a number of separable variables.

Is Subjective Well-Being the Summum Bonum?

Subjective well-being means that a person evaluates his or her life as desirable, and feels pleasant emotions. Furthermore, as reviewed below, happy people are in some instances more effective and successful. However, we believe for several reasons that happiness is only one good, not the highest good that trumps other goods. Although some might argue that we seek other ends as a means to feeling happy, and therefore that happiness is the final and sufficient goal, we are convinced that this argument is incorrect.

As reviewed below, in most societies happiness is considered desirable, the importance placed on this value differs substantially across cultures. In addition, the philosopher Robert Nozick's hypothetical "experiencing machine" suggests that people do not want to experience pleasure as simply an end in itself. Rather, they want to be happy for the right reasons. Nozick asks us to imagine being hooked to a computer that can produce pleasant life-like experiences without actually undergoing them. He suggests that nobody wants to be hooked to such a machine because they want the actual events, not ersatz perceptions, even if they feel extremely rewarding and pleasurable. We expanded on Nozick's experience machine by asking college students to imagine taking pleasurable vacations by being hooked to a computer. As Nozick predicted, they strongly preferred real vacations to this electronic experience. Indeed, respondents did not find desirable any of the imaginary versions of vacations we offered them. Similarly, when we ask classes of students whether they would want to be hooked to a computer for the rest of their lives, one that continually produces intense pleasurable sensations (even though the person would be cut off from the real world), fewer than one percent say they would want such a life. This suggests that people want pleasant feelings for the right reasons.

The experience machine might seem absurd, but we don't have to search hard to find a close equivalent in the real world—Prozac. And yet, if people reject the idea of an experience machine, why would some people choose to take Prozac even though they are not depressed? We suggest that they want to do so only because they think that it might enhance their positive emotions, but that their emotions will still result from the things that are happening in their lives. That is, pleasant emotions will be enhanced, but will still be caused by the things the person values. The fact that the value placed on happiness across cultures varies considerably also suggests to us that it is not the one universal good.

Valuing Happiness

We examined the importance of happiness among college students in various societies. In Table 2 we show importance values for 20 nations (out of 47 that we examined) for happiness, wealth, love, and several other characteristics. As can be seen, happiness was rated as an important value in all nations. Nevertheless, the values clearly vary, with Latin American nations placing the highest importance on happiness and Asian Pacific Rim societies placing the lower values on happiness. When we examined how desirable pleasant versus unpleasant emotions are considered to be in various

cultures, we found the same pattern. In Latin nations, pleasant emotions were considered to be very desirable and unpleasant emotions were considered to be very undesirable, whereas in China the two types of emotions were considered to be almost equally desirable.

Other cross-cultural findings also point to the differential importance placed on pleasant or unpleasant emotions. For example, Oishi found that Asian American students were satisfied with days when they did what their parents would like, whereas European Americans were satisfied when they had fun and pleasant emotions. Again, such findings suggest that pleasant emotions are but one value that people might prefer. Similarly, Shalom Schwarz has shown that there is a common structure of values across cultures, but that only in some societies are factors such as pleasure and independence most preferred, whereas in other societies values such as duty, wealth, or equality are most valued.

Further supporting the idea that happiness is not the *Summum Bonum*, Oishi found that Asian Americans worked at a task they were not proficient at, to increase their mastery even at the expense of a pleasant mood, whereas European Americans preferred to move to a task where they might perform better, with a subsequent increase in mood. The fact that people differentially value SWB in comparison to other values also suggests that happiness in terms of pleasant moods is not likely the *summum bonum* for which all other values are sought. One still might argue, however, that people believe that their long-run happiness will be highest if they achieve these other values, and it could be argued that positive experience is still the ultimate goal, but only in the long-run. Even then, it appears that people want happiness for the right reasons, for outcomes they value.

Causes and Correlates of SWB

Goals. Emmons, Little, Freund, and Klinger have all shown that possessing goals that are important to the individual, and making progress toward those goals are important to SWB. In addition, Emmons found that having goals about which one is ambivalent, as well as having goals that strongly conflict with each other, predict the experience of unpleasant emotions. In our laboratory, Sohlberg has shown that the effects of social comparison on SWB are strongest when they influence a person's goals. It is likely that goal progress is one of the most basic predictors of SWB. Cantor has emphasized the importance of examining life tasks in terms of developmental stages, with cultures prescribing certain goals for each stage. Thus, goal progress is probably a universal cause of happiness, but the specific goals that lead to happiness vary substantially.

Temperament and personality. Another important determinant of SWB is a person's inborn temperament. Whereas temperament is the term often used to denote an individual's predispositions that emerge early in life, personality is often thought of as the individual differences that emerge later in life and are influenced by learning.

The Minnesota Twin Studies, based in the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota, have been pivotal in demonstrating that genetic differences

between individuals play a large role in determining their SWB. Indeed, it appears in their studies of twins separated early in life, compared to twins not separated, about half of the variability in affect is due to temperament. For unpleasant emotions the researchers found no effects of early home environment, but for pleasant emotions there was an early home environmental effect. In both cases, the influence of genetics was strong. Although the genetic effects are powerful, Lykken has argued that individuals can do things to increase their SWB.

Among personality variables, self-esteem, extraversion, and neuroticism have been studied extensively. We found that self-esteem is a very strong correlate of SWB in individualistic nations, but a less strong predictor in collectivistic societies. Neuroticism is the propensity to experience negative emotions and thoughts. Therefore it is unsurprising that it predicts lower SWB because there are heightened levels of unpleasant emotions among neurotics. Costa and McCrae proposed in 1980 that neuroticism is related primarily to the negative affect system, and therefore, neurotics will experience more unpleasant emotions (but not necessarily fewer positive emotions). In contrast, they proposed that extraverts are predisposed to experience more pleasant emotions because their positive affect system is more sensitive to rewarding events.

Our laboratory has explored why extraverts experience more positive emotions, and the reasons are manifold. For one thing, extraverts appear to experience more positive events. For another, extraverts spend a bit more time with others, and many social interactions are a major source of pleasant emotions. Finally, Lucas proposed that a propensity to experience positive emotions is the “glue” that holds the characteristics of extraversion (e.g., warmth, sociability, and dominance) together. He suggests that extraverts are more sociable only when situations seem rewarding, and that positive affect reactivity is the core of the traits of extraversion rather than sociability. In other words, Lucas proposes that some people are predisposed to pleasant emotions, and that these emotions in turn cause sociability, warmth, and dominance.

Quality social relationships. In one study conducted with Martin Seligman, we found that the happiest people all had good quality social relationships. It was not, of course, that all their relationships were good ones, but that they all perceived their relationships in at least two important areas out of three (family, friends, and romantic partner) to be very positive. Quality social relationships were necessary for SWB in that not a single individual in the happiest group was deprived of them. However, good social relationships were not sufficient for SWB because even some very unhappy people had them. In another study, Lucas and Diener (and others) found that widows took many years for their life satisfaction to recover to previous levels of SWB after their husbands died. There is now much evidence pointing to the critical role of social relationships to SWB. However, there is also evidence suggesting that happy people have better social relationships than do unhappy people, indicating that the causal influence is likely to go in both directions.

Basic need fulfillment. Some prominent researchers in the field such as Ruut Veenhoven suggest that the fulfillment of basic and universal needs, for example food,

shelter, and status, form the basis of SWB. They point to evidence showing that people in very poor nations are less happy on average than those in wealthier nations, and that there appears to be only small increases in SWB in nations after they reach a certain level of wealth. This evidence is not definitive in showing the importance of basic needs, however, because the learned desire for material goods can also be used to explain the pattern of data across nations.

Basic needs go beyond the physical necessities of food, water, and shelter. For instance, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory proposes that needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness underlie feelings of SWB. One difficulty with the basic needs approach is the difficulty in defining what the basic or inherent human needs are. Another challenge is to understand why basic needs would influence SWB. We proposed that basic needs are important to SWB insofar as they influence a person's goals, which they are likely to do. However, it seems as though the fulfillment of basic needs is not the entire explanation of SWB because the fulfillment of learned desires also seems to influence SWB.

Health. Researchers distinguish between subjective health and objective health. It should be noted that subjective health, not just objective health, is an important variable in its own right. For example, people's self-ratings of their health predict longevity, even after controlling for a physician's ratings of health. Subjective health correlates at moderate levels with SWB, but objective health often correlates only at very low levels with SWB. Apparently, many people are able to adapt to bad health. And although many people claim that health is a most important cause of well-being, people seem to adapt to good health so that it fades into the background. However, life satisfaction is lower among people with severe health problems, especially if there are multiple problems that interfere with activities. Furthermore, the caretakers of people with severe health problems such as patients with Alzheimer's also show lower levels of life satisfaction, and their life satisfaction may decline over time as the impairment and burden worsen.

Demographics. Early researchers in the field, often from a sociological tradition, tended to focus their energies on assessing the relation of SWB to demographic factors such as age, sex, ethnicity, education, and income. This research showed that taken all together, demographic factors only account for a small amount of the variance in SWB, not more than 20 percent. Recent work has moved beyond the early cross-sectional studies. For example, our studies show that married people do report higher SWB than nonmarried individuals, but that this effect is due both due to the influence of marriage in our society, and to the fact that happy people have a greater likelihood of marrying.

Although some trends in SWB have been found with age, these findings have not always replicated, and the age effects appear to be small. Similarly, the differences in global SWB between men and women seem to be small. However, for sex differences there is an interesting complexity. Women report as much global happiness and satisfaction as men, but they also report many more negative emotions, and are more likely to suffer from negative mood disorders. This presents a paradox – women are as globally happy as men, but report much more negative affect. We propose that gender

differences in emotional intensity might explain the paradox. That women also report higher levels of positive emotions supports our explanation. Nevertheless, there are other explanations for the greater levels of depression and anxiety among women, including the idea that women are more social and interdependent. Consequently, they are also more likely to be influenced by social events—for better and for worse. Yet another explanation is that women tend to ruminate more on past bad experiences. As yet, the discrepancy between the sexes in measures of negative emotions have not been explained to everyone's satisfaction.

Resources. Although resources can be external, such as money and social contacts, they can also be internal, such as education, self-confidence, and skills. Diener and Fujita examined the relation of resources to SWB, and found that internal resources such as self-confidence were better predictors of life satisfaction among college students than were external resources such as money. It might be that internal resources are more important than external ones because they can be used to obtain external resources, whereas one might use external resources ineffectively if the internal resources are absent.

Culture. The conditions in a society do make a difference to SWB, with very poor nations, as well as those in disarray from upheavals such as revolution or dramatic political change, showing the lowest levels of SWB. For example, the former communist nations in Eastern Europe reported low levels of SWB after the communist system broke down. A complex of factors tend to correlate highly with the wealth of nations – human rights, democracy, longevity, and individualism – and as yet a strong differentiation of the influence of these various factors on SWB has not been accomplished satisfactorily. In addition to these societal conditions, it also appears that some cultures are more positive in their orientation (e.g., Latin nations), valuing happiness more and attending more to positive information. Other nations pay more attention to other goals such as mastery and pleasing one's family (e.g., East Asian), and show lower levels of SWB than one would expect based on the material conditions in these societies.

An interesting pattern emerges regarding individualism versus collectivism. Individualism is the cultural pattern where the freedom and importance of the individual is given center stage, whereas in collectivistic societies there is a greater emphasis on the importance of the group, and fitting in. People in individualistic societies can “follow their bliss,” marry who they want, live where they want, and do the work they desire. In collectivistic societies, these decisions are typically made for the individual by others. There is a tendency in individualistic societies for people to report high life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and work satisfaction. Paradoxically, however, levels of suicide, divorce, and job turnover are higher in individualistic societies as well. It appears that people are happier on average with their marriages because those who are not happy divorce, and a similar pattern holds for one's job. Similarly, people are perhaps more likely in individualistic societies to commit suicide if they are not happy. Levels of pathology such as crime and homelessness also tend to be high in individualistic societies, especially when levels of income are controlled. Perhaps the extended families

of collectivistic societies provide structure and support for marginal individuals, which is less frequent in individualistic societies.

Not only can we examine culture in terms of average differences, but we can also examine whether different variables correlate with SWB across cultures. Suh and his colleagues found that personal consistency is more important to happiness in individualistic nations, and that pleasing one's family is more important to life satisfaction in collectivistic ones. We found that autonomy and growth are stronger predictors of life satisfaction in the USA than in S. Korea or China. Many findings, including the important work of Oishi, now point to differences in the correlates of happiness across cultures. Oishi also has found that there are differing patterns across cultures in terms of the situations in which individuals experience more and less happiness. It seems that although there may be some human universals in terms of what causes happiness, there are also factors that are specific to cultures.

Income. An extensive amount of research has been conducted on the relation between money and happiness, and reviews of this literature are available from Diener and Biswas-Diener, as well as Diener and Oishi. Several important findings have emerged from this body of work. First, income shows small positive correlations with SWB in wealthy nations, with the very richest people reporting the highest levels of SWB and poor people reporting relatively more negative emotions. Second, as mentioned above, rich nations have higher average levels of SWB than poor nations, but this effect seems to be small once nations reach per capita income levels of 10,000 US dollars or more per year. Third, although income has increased dramatically (even after controlling for taxes and inflation) in wealthy nations such as the USA and Japan since World War II, there appear to have been no concomitant increases in SWB. Finally, people who have dramatic increases in income, such as those who win large lotteries, do appear to increase in SWB. However, the evidence on this point is not yet strong. A negative income tax experiment in the USA led to greater levels of stress when welfare income increased. Thus, the effects of income on SWB are not simple and linear. Some of the positive effects of income might be cancelled by rising material desires, or perhaps by stressors such as longer work hours and higher expectations for achievement.

Another interesting finding is that materialistic people, those who hold money in high regard in comparison to other values, tend to report lower SWB. We have explored this effect with a number of studies. One explanation seems to be that people who highly value money might sacrifice social relationships to earn more, and this appears to be an unwise tradeoff. Another explanation is that feelings of insecurity lead people to value income more. Finally, it is possible that sufficient income is a more elusive goal than some other aims because its upper ends are unbounded, and therefore people might find it harder to feel fulfilled in this area because their aspirations continue to rise.

Comparison standards. Because people with greatly varying life circumstances are sometimes satisfied or dissatisfied, the idea of comparison standards has become a prominent theoretical idea in this field. The idea is that people might compare their circumstances to lofty or low standards, and this will produce differences in SWB. Even a

pauper might be happy if s/he had a standard comparable to homelessness, for example. One standard is people's goals, which derive from their culture and learning histories. In other words, people's desires provide a standard that is likely to influence how they react to ongoing events. But social and temporal standards can also influence SWB – where other people stand, and how one stood in the past in this area. We suggest that any standard can influence SWB if it is salient at the time of the satisfaction judgment, but that some standards are chronically salient and therefore are likely to experience SWB most of the time. Goals produce a standard that is highly salient and therefore frequently accessible because they are used to guide ongoing behavior, and therefore goal progress is likely to influence SWB across a wide variety of situations. Thus, we predict that progress toward goals is one of the most important predictors of SWB.

Most People Are Happy

Situations often account for less of the between-person variability in SWB than we would think they might. One reason for this is that people adapt at least to some extent to both bad and good events and circumstances. Another reason is that temperament accounts for a substantial portion of the individual differences in SWB, leaving less room for the influence of situations. In addition, personality to some degree predicts conditions because extraverts have more good events in their lives and neurotics experience more bad events. Thus, conditions themselves are not independent of an individual's personality. However, another reason that situations do not always have strong effects is that people might be built with a "positive offset," a propensity to experience mild pleasant feelings in the presence of neutral stimuli, and therefore the range of happiness among most groups is largely restricted to positive levels. Our data show that most people are happy. That is, except for groups that are living under dire circumstances such as prison or homelessness, mostly people report levels of SWB above neutral. Not only do broad representative samples in industrialized nations report positive SWB, but even people in poor nations report average levels of SWB above neutrality. Further, groups such as the Maasai, Inughuit, and Amish report SWB above neutral, even though they are poor in terms of luxury goods.

There are some groups that report negative overall levels of SWB, such as the homeless in the US, newly incarcerated prisoners, street prostitutes, and mental inpatients. In each of these cases, the groups have very difficult lives, including the relative lack of respect within the broader society, as well as substantial personal problems.

The Consequences of SWB

Although a variety of circumstances correlate with high SWB in cross-sectional survey studies, the direction of causality is usually in doubt. For example, health or marriage might cause happiness, but they also might result from it. For example, happy people might be healthier because they follow healthy life regimens. Laboratory and longitudinal studies help us to disentangle the causal directions involved in our work. When pleasant emotions are experimentally induced in the laboratory, a number of characteristics seem to follow: sociability, activity, altruism, self-confidence, positive

perceptions of others, and flexible thinking. Thus, it appears that happiness causes these characteristics, not just results from them. Longitudinal studies are also informative in unraveling the causal nexus. For instance, when we follow people's moods and activities over time with experience sampling, they seem to feel more altruistic and sociable when they are in a good mood.

In long-term longitudinal studies, we can examine whether happy people later experience certain outcomes. For example, we found that entering college freshman who reported higher cheerfulness at college entry were likely to be earning substantially higher incomes 15 years later than individuals who reported low cheerfulness. Similar findings have been replicated by others. In terms of social relationships, we found that women who reported high life satisfaction were more likely to later marry than those who reported low life satisfaction. In a review article by Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener, we review the evidence showing that happy people are more successful in a number of life domains.

Although happy individuals might be better able to reach approach goals (as opposed to avoidance goals), due to the greater self-confidence, sociability, and other characteristics of those high in SWB, this does not mean that they necessarily will achieve goals that are desirable from a society's point of view. A happy person might be more able to reach her or his goals, regardless of whether the goals are socially desirable. In this sense, the benefits of happiness rest on the assumption that people have been socialized to desire goals that are valued in that culture. Furthermore, happy people might not be as adroit at avoiding mistakes.

Does SWB Define the Good Society?

What is the good society? For many years many anthropologists argued that cultures can only be evaluated from their own perspective – that is, everything is relative – and therefore that no comparative judgments can be made. One problem with this argument is that it suggests that a culture such as Nazi Germany that tortures and kills millions is no worse than modern day Sweden. Such an argument is simply ludicrous to lay people, and makes academics irrelevant to everyday discourse and national policy making. The anthropologist Robert Edgerton argues that the relativistic position is mistaken, and that some cultures are in truth bad for people. He argues that cultures that produce unhappiness and ill health in the majority of people cannot be considered to be good ones.

We believe that for a society to be a good one, the majority of people must experience positive levels of SWB. They must think their lives are valuable and rewarding, and people should not feel a preponderance of depression and anxiety. However, additional factors such as justice also define a good society. Just as for individual lives, positive SWB seems to be necessary but not sufficient, for the good society.

When we examine the national surveys from around the world, several conclusions can be drawn. Northern European nations, including Switzerland, Iceland, Sweden, Netherlands, and Norway, usually stand at the top of the list, followed by nations such as the USA, Canada, and Australia. All of these nations are wealthy, have high longevity, are democratic, and score high on measures of human rights. The nations lowest in SWB are currently the Eastern European nations that were formerly communist. It appears that the fall of communism produced massive declines in SWB in these nations because of the economic, political, and ideological instability. Very poor nations also tend to score low in SWB.

Some societies report positive levels of SWB even though they are poor by American standards. For example, the Maasai, a herding people in Kenya, report on average being satisfied with their lives and various aspects of their lives, as well as feeling more pleasant than unpleasant emotions. Even though the Maasai have no indoor plumbing or electricity, and their houses are usually very small and are made of dung, why do the Maasai report positive SWB? Their culture is intact and they live a traditional lifestyle. The Maasai have food, friends, shelter, and their traditional daily routines and practices, although many express a desire for better health care. Thus, material luxury is clearly not necessary for high SWB.

People in Latin American nations often express higher SWB than those in East Asian countries, at least when income is controlled. This seems to be due to the fact that Latin societies value happiness to a greater extent, and have norms against experiencing too much unpleasant affect. In contrast, East Asians tend to value achievement and mastery more, and tend to downplay the importance of happiness. We would definitely not conclude, however, that Latinos do not experience unhappiness and that Asians are never happy.

Can we evaluate societies, then, in terms of SWB? We can, but other values will also enter our evaluation as well. We can say that very poor urban societies, as well as unstable and rapidly changing societies tend to produce unhappiness, and therefore are less desirable, other things being equal. But societies in transition might be the cost of moving to a more desirable state, and therefore we might judge that the change was worth the cost.

Dynamics of the Mood System

In considering emotional well-being, it is important to understand that the affect system, including moods and emotions, was built by evolution to aid survival and reproduction, not to produce the greatest amount of pleasure for individuals. In this regard, there are several key features of the system that should be noted. First, most people express more positive than negative emotions; the ratio of positive to negative emotions is often 3 or 4 to 1. It appears that people are prepared to feel mild positive emotions in order to facilitate approach behavior when no threats are present. The second characteristic worth noting is that even the happiest individuals do not continually experience happiness at very intense levels. People who report being extremely happy are usually an 8 or a 9 on a 10-point happiness scale. We found that individuals who report

being at a 10 in happiness were no longer at a 10 two years later. In other words, elation is a temporary emotion; nobody feels it continuously. Another finding worth noting about the happiest people is that when we follow their moods with on-line experience sampling, they move up and down, and occasionally dip into the negative range. Although the happiest individuals do not feel negative moods a large amount of time, they do sometimes feel them. We theorize that people must be able to feel negative emotions under some circumstances in order to facilitate effective functioning. Under some circumstances it is beneficial to survival to feel fearful, and under some circumstances it is desirable to experience sadness, guilt, or anger. Although we clearly do not want these unpleasant emotions to dominate a person's life, it is probably necessary to functioning to be able to feel them under a few circumstances. People who are stuck in a manic, ecstatic mood do not function well, and even our happiest individuals do not feel continual ecstasy.

Optimal Levels of SWB, and Interventions to Increase It

From what we say above, it is clear that it is important to have a mood system that is capable of experiencing both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Continual euphoria is not functional, and the search for this state through drugs or other means appears to be self-defeating. At the same time, people who are on average happy seem to be successful people, and individuals who are depressed seem to not function well in many situations. Thus, people who are happy, but are able to react with negative emotions at appropriate times, seem to be functioning at an optimal level. Thus, the maximum amount of pleasant experience might not be optimal level in terms of functioning to obtain other goals.

It is likely that the specific optimal level of pleasant emotions depends on the circumstances and goals of the individual. We have hypothesized that some jobs, for example sales and supervisory work, require higher levels of positive affect than certain other jobs such as those requiring vigilance for dangerous conditions. Similarly, the optimal level of happiness might depend on the culture, with some cultures being more oriented toward approach and feeling positive, and other cultures being more vigilant about avoiding errors and achieving equanimity. Furthermore, Maya Tamir in our laboratory has found that people with varying personalities are aided by emotions of different types. Finally, the specific goals of the individual might require more or less positive affect, depending on the degree of active energy and approach behavior that the goals require, versus striving for quieter pursuits that require less sociability and activity. Thus, we are only beginning to understand the extent to which various forms of SWB are beneficial to functioning.

Conclusions

Psychologists and other scholars have now learned much about the experience of subjective well-being – about its components, its causes, and its consequences. At the same time, the field is still relatively new and therefore there are very large uncharted territories, and very important questions that remain open.

Is there enough known with some certainty that people can use the findings in their own lives, or that policy makers can rely on the findings to guide future policies? We do know some things with a degree of certainty. For example, although temperament is a strong influence on SWB and people do to some extent adapt to conditions, there are also compelling data pointing to the influence of situations and circumstances on SWB. It does seem that societies can differ in the SWB they produce. Although there are other important factors to include when evaluating a society, SWB is one important factor that can be used in assessing the quality of life of nations. Respondents from around the world believe that happiness is very important, but we also find that people want to achieve happiness through obtaining things that they value.

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Table 1

Life Satisfaction of Selected Groups

<u>Positive Groups</u>	<u>Life Satisfaction</u>
Forbe's Richest Americans	5.8
Maasai (East African tribal people)	5.4
Pennsylvania Amish	5.1
Inughuit (Northern Greenland)	5.1
American College Students	4.9
Cloistered Nuns (USA)	4.8
Illinois Nurses	4.8
Calcutta Slum Dwellers	4.4
Neutral Point of Scale = 4.0	
<u>Negative Groups</u> (below neutral)	
Calcutta Sex Workers	3.6
Calcutta Homeless	3.2
Mental outpatients entering therapy	2.9
California Homeless	2.8
Mental inpatients (hospitalized)	2.4
Prisoners, newly jailed men in county jail	2.4
Detroit Sex Workers	2.1

Note: Scores potentially range from 1 (Extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (Extremely satisfied)

Table 2

Importance Ratings of Happiness and Other Values

<u>Nation</u>	<u>Happiness</u>	<u>Wealth</u>	<u>Love</u>	<u>Health</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Attractiveness</u>	<u>Getting to Heaven</u>
OVERALL	8.0	6.8	7.9	7.9	7.3	6.3	6.7
Brazil	8.7	6.9	8.7	8.6	8.3	6.4	7.8
Canada	8.6	7.1	8.6	8.2	8.1	6.3	6.5
Chile	8.6	6.9	8.6	8.1	8.2	5.8	7.8
Portugal	8.6	6.5	8.8	8.6	8.4	5.6	6.4
Australia	8.3	6.5	8.2	7.9	7.6	5.9	6.8
Nepal	8.2	7.2	8.4	8.3	8.3	6.3	7.2
Egypt	8.1	7.6	7.4	8.0	7.1	7.2	7.3
Ghana	8.1	7.1	7.9	8.0	7.2	6.7	8.1
Greece	8.1	6.8	8.3	8.8	8.2	6.1	6.4
Nigeria	8.1	7.4	8.2	8.4	7.1	7.2	8.4
Russia	8.1	7.3	7.9	8.2	7.9	6.9	5.9
Thailand	8.1	7.4	7.4	7.8	7.6	6.4	6.8
USA	8.1	6.7	8.3	7.6	7.6	6.2	7.3
Indonesia	8.0	7.2	7.9	8.0	7.9	6.7	8.2
Poland	8.0	6.8	8.2	8.2	8.1	6.2	7.5
Iran	7.8	7.0	8.1	8.5	7.9	6.6	7.9
South Africa	7.8	6.4	7.6	7.6	7.2	5.5	8.2
Bangladesh	7.7	6.7	7.3	6.6	6.6	6.9	6.8
Germany	7.7	6.8	8.6	8.4	8.0	6.5	5.7
Switzerland	7.6	6.4	8.4	8.3	8.0	6.2	6.1
India	7.5	7.0	7.5	7.8	7.5	5.7	6.6
Kuwait	7.4	7.3	7.8	8.4	7.9	8.1	7.9
Japan	7.4	6.6	7.8	7.8	6.8	5.9	6.1
Uganda	7.4	6.7	8.4	7.4	7.9	7.1	8.0
China	7.3	7.0	7.4	7.8	7.5	6.1	5.0
Malaysia	7.3	6.6	7.2	7.4	7.2	6.5	7.2

Note: Ratings made by college student respondents. Potential responses range from 9 (extremely important) to 1 (Not at all important). Nations shown are selected from the 47 nations that were sampled.