

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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Subjective well-being is no great issue in sociology; the subject is not mentioned in sociological textbooks (a notable exception is Nolan & Lenski, 2004) and is rarely discussed in sociological journals. This absence has many reasons: pragmatic, ideological, and theoretical. To begin with pragmatic reasons: Sociologists are more interested in what people do than in how they feel. Their main objective is to explain social behavior, and subjective well-being is, at best, a variable in that context. A related point is that sociology is about collectivities, whereas subjective well-being is an individual-level concept. A further pragmatic reason is that sociologists earn their living dealing with social problems. So, if they look at well-being at all, they focus on "ill-being" in the first place. Next there are ideological reasons. Many sociologists are committed to notions of objective well-being, such as social equality and social cohesion. They are therefore not eager to investigate how people actually feel in such conditions and often ignore research results that contradict their favored views. When people appear to feel subjectively good in conditions deemed to be objectively bad, the discrepancy is easily disposed of as "desirability bias" or "false consciousness." Lastly, there are theoretical reasons. As we will see below, sociologists tend to think of subjective well-being as a mere idea that depends on social comparison with variable standards and that is therefore a whimsical state of mind, not worth pursuing and hence not worth studying.

Nevertheless, the subject of subjective well-being is not entirely absent in sociology. Job satisfaction is a common topic in the sociology of work, marital satisfaction is a well-known variable in the sociology of family, and life satisfaction is a regular theme in the sociology of aging. Recently subjective well-being has also become a theme in comparative sociology and in social indicators research. I have reviewed this sociological literature elsewhere (Veenhoven, 2006a).

Questions about Subjective Well-Being

Theories are tentative answers to questions. In the case of subjective well-being, four main questions are at stake. The first question is what subjective well-being is precisely, and, in particular, how we distinguish subjective well-being as such from its determinants. The second question—how people appraise how well they are—concerns the mental processes involved. The third question is about the conditions for subjective well-being and is closely linked to the question of how subjective well-being can be raised. Lastly a fourth question is about the consequences of subjective well-being, which links up to the ideological issue of whether subjective well-being should be raised. In this chapter I give an outline of how mainstream sociology has dealt with these four questions.

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1. QUESTION 1: WHAT IS "SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING"?

In this chapter we follow Diener's definition of subjective well-being as judging life positively and feeling good: "Thus a person is said to have high [subjective well-being] if she or he experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger. Contrariwise, a person is said to have low [subjective well-being] if she or he is dissatisfied with life, experiences little joy and affection and frequently feels negative emotions such as anger or anxiety" (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997, p. 25).

My own definition of happiness is close to Diener et al.'s definition of subjective well-being, and I also make a distinction between cognitive and affective appraisals of life. Yet I do not see life satisfaction as a mere cognitive appraisal but as an overall judgment of life that draws on two sources of information: cognitive comparison with standards of the good life (contentment) and affective information from how one feels most of the time (hedonic level of affect). In my language "overall happiness" is synonymous with life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 1984)

Most sociologists associate the term with a somewhat different matter. First, sociologists focus typically on problems. In sociology books words for subjective experiences denote negative states most of the time, such as *anomie*, *alienation*, *deprivation*, and subjective *poverty*. Second, sociological notions of subjective well-being are typically more specific and denote not only *how* well one feels but also about *what*. *Anomie* is discomfort about the moral climate, and in *alienation* is the feeling of being ruled by a system in which one does not take part (Beerling, 1978). This specificity is connected to still another difference: Sociological notions of subjective well-being are not only about *how* one feels about *what*, they are often also about why one feels so (i.e., the cause is part of the concept). *Anomie* is not seen as a mere state of mind, it is also believed to be a reaction to normative erosion in society. This way of thinking about subjective well-being is already visible in the work of Comte (1851-1854), the founding father of sociology. His notion of "*bonheur*" (happiness) denotes a state of intellectual enlightenment combined with sacral feelings of inclusion and consensus that result from social progress (Ple, 2000).

This way of conceptualizing subjective well-being stems from *rhetorical* use of the concept; it serves to communicate that something is beneficial and for that reason that something is connected conceptually with good feelings. Obviously, this way of conceptualization makes less sense *analytically*; if we put presumed conditions for well-being in one hat with experienced well-being, we will never be able to see what causes what. As a result, such concepts cannot be meaningfully applied in a utilitarian search for social conditions that produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Applied for that purpose, such concepts lead to circular reasoning. If, for example, we define subjective well-being as the feeling of connectedness that accompanies social integration, social integration is, by definition, a condition for subjective well-being. Empirical research based on such concepts will do no more than echo prepossession. This is typically the case with the indexes of well-being that are commonly used in sociology. I have discussed this matter in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven, 2000a).

In Diener et al.'s definition, subjective well-being is seen as the product of an overall appraisal of life that balances the good and the bad. This conceptualization does not restrict itself to specific feelings and does not mix up the subjective experience with its possible causes. In the rest of this chapter I use the term *subjective well-being* in this sense.

This concept of subjective well-being is close to Bentham's (1970) classic definition

of happiness as "the sum of pleasures and pains." Most sociologists know of this concept, but few have applied it, although it made a comeback in the 1960s in some pockets of sociology, in particular, in social indicators research and the sociology of aging. I was among the early re-adaptors (Veenhoven, 1968), but certainly not the first sociologist who harked back to Bentham; the first U.S. study on happiness in this sense had appeared in 1965 (Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965),

2. QUESTION 2: HOW DO WE APPRAISE HOW WELL WE ARE?

Sticking to Diener et al.'s (1997) definition of subjective well-being as being satisfied with life and feeling good, the next question is how we determine this state. What is going on in the mind when we assess how much we enjoy life? This question is of more than mere academic interest, because the answer to it has implications for how we can advance subjective well-being (Question 3) and whether it is worth advancing (Question 4).

Although sociologists are not specialized in matters of the mind, they still make psychological assumptions. They typically borrow from cognitive psychology, in which they find support for their view on humans as socially determined. In this line, sociologists see subjective well-being as a cognitive "construct" shaped by collective notions of the good life and as a result of comparisons, particularly social comparison.

2.1 Presumed Social Construction of Subjective Well-Being

Social construction theory discusses how we make sense of things. It assumes that we "construct" mental representations of reality, using collective notions as building blocks (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Social constructionism stresses human thinking and is blind to affective experience and innate drives.

In this view, subjective well-being is also a social construction and, as such, comparable to notions such as "beauty" and "fairness." A common reasoning in this line is that subjective well-being depends on shared notions about life and that these collective notions frame individual appraisals.

One of the ways this process is presumed to work is by shaping perspectives toward optimism (the glass half full) or pessimism (half empty). Optimistic cultures tend to highlight the positive aspects of life, whereas pessimistic cultures emphasize the shortcomings. Americans have been mentioned as an example of the former view and the French of the latter (e.g., Ostroot & Snyder [1985]). In that line Inglehart (1990) suggests that happiness is lower in France than in the United States because life was harder in France for earlier generations, and this experience is mirrored in a more pessimistic outlook on life today.

Another cognitive mechanism presumed to be involved is comparison with shared notions of the good life. In this view, subjective well-being is the gap between perceptions of life-as-it-is with notions of how-life-should-be (Michalos, 1985). In this line it is commonly argued that the advertisement industry reduces our well-being, because it fosters dreams of a life that is out of reach for the common person. Another example of this view is the claim that subjective well-being can be bought with resignation.

An additional mechanism that has been mentioned is the tendency to see ourselves through the eyes of others and hence also our subjective well-being. In this view, subjective well-being is a "reflected appraisal," We would be positive about our life when people around us deem us to be well off and negative when others see us as a loser. In this vein the lower happiness among singles has been explained as the result of a negative stereotype: Because singles are "labeled" as pitiful, they come to see themselves as miserable, in spite of the apparent advantages of single living (e.g., Davies & Strong, 1977).

The constructionist view implies that there is little value to subjective well-being because

it is a mere idea. In addition, because notions about the good life vary across time and culture, subjective well-being is also seen to be culturally relative. A life that is deemed perfect in one idea of the good life may be seen as a failure from another point of view. For this reason this theory is popular among the critics of the utilitarian creed that we should aim at "greater happiness for a greater number"; it reduces happiness to something insignificant.

2.1.1 *Theoretical Plausibility*

It is beyond doubt that shared notions frame much of our appraisals, yet this is not to say that all awareness is socially constructed. We need no shared notions to experience pain or hunger; culture, at best, modifies our reflection on these experiences a bit. Our understanding also draws on external stimuli and inner signals. The question is thus how this process works in the case of subjective well-being.

The answer to that question depends on the definition of subjective well-being. If the term is defined as the mere belief that one's life fits the common Standards for a good life, social construction is evidently involved. However, if the definition also involves affective experience, this is not so evident. In this chapter we follow Diener et al.'s (1997) definition of subjective well-being, and that definition involves a preponderance of positive affect over negative affect.

Affect and cognition are linked, but they are certainly not the same. Evaluations of life draw on both sources of information, and affective appraisals dominate. When striking the balance of their life, people appear to use their mood as the prime source of information (Schwartz & Strack, 1991), and consequently overall happiness typically correlates more strongly with hedonic levels of affect than with contentment (Veenhoven, 2006c, H6¹). There is logic in this thinking, because the affect system is evolutionary older and serves to ascertain that the organism's basic needs are met. The cognitive system developed on top of this in *Homo sapiens*, but it did not replace the affective system. It is rather an additional device that allows planning of activities and better learning from experience. In that light it is unlikely that subjective well-being is a mere cognition.

2.1.2 *Empirical Support*

The reality value of this view cannot be tested as such, because the human mind is still a black box. Yet we can check its aptness indirectly, when we consider implications of the theory that subjective well-being is a mere social construction.

Culture Specific?

One implication is that conditions for subjective well-being are variable across cultures. If subjective well-being is a culture-specific construct, its determinants will also be culturally specific. Hence empirical studies on correlates of subjective well-being must show considerable cultural variation and hardly any universal pattern. Yet the available data show otherwise. Comparison of average subjective well-being across nations reveals a common pattern. Subjective well-being is systematically higher in nations that provide a decent material standard of living, that are politically democratic and well governed, and where the cultural climate is characterized by trust and tolerance. Together these objective societal characteristics explain about 75% of the differences in subjective well-being across nations (Veenhoven & Kalmijn, 2005). Comparison of correlations within nations also shows much similarity. In all countries, the married appear to be happier than singles (Diener, 2000), and health (both physical health and mental) is also a strong correlate of happiness all over the world (Veenhoven, 2006c, P6, M7¹). Likewise, the differences in happiness across age and gender are typically small everywhere (Veenhoven, 2006c, A4, G1).

Variable over Time?

A second implication is that subjective well-being must be variable across time. If subjective well-being depends on shared notions of the good life, it will vary with fads about that matter, and this variation must reflect erratic movements in average subjective well-being in nations, comparable to changes in political preference and tastes for music. Yet again this not what the data show. Average subjective well-being appears to be very stable over time, at least in Western nations over the last 30 years, where happiness rose slightly without much fluctuation (Veenhoven, 2006b). Follow-up studies at the individual level also show considerable constancy over time (Ehrhardt, Saris, & Veenhoven, 2000).

Inconsequential?

A third implication is that subjective well-being is of little consequence. If subjective well-being is sheer cognitive spin, based on fashionable ideas, it will not matter much whether it pans out positively or negatively. Subjective well-being is then a petty appraisal, such as a person's preference for one kind of wallpaper or another; nice in itself but of no consequence for anything more than that.

Once more, this appears not to be the case. Subjective well-being goes hand in hand with objective thriving. Furthermore, follow-up studies have shown that subjective well-being is a strong predictor of physical health and longevity (e.g., Danner, Friesen, & Snowdon, 2001). Together, these findings do not support the theory that subjective well-being is a mere making of the mind.

Note that these findings concern "subjective well-being-as-such" and not opinions about what adds to subjective well-being. Subjective well-being-as-such is something that we experience ourselves and which we can appraise without the help of others. Though we know *how* we feel, we often do not know *why*. In attributing grounds for our well-being, we draw more on a shared view. In this respect subjective well-being is comparable to a headache: a headache-as-such is not a social construction, it is an autonomous signal from the body. Yet our interpretations of what gives us a headache depend very much on hearsay.

2.2 *Well-Being as Surpassing the Joneses*

All sociologists learned in their student days about the exemplary case of "relative deprivation," described in Stouffer's (1949) classic study "The American Soldier." One of the areas assessed in this study was the satisfaction with promotion chances. Contrary to expectation, the satisfaction with this aspect of Army life appeared to be higher in units where promotion chances were low, such as the military police, than in units where promotion chances were high, such as the Air Force. This phenomenon was explained in terms of social comparison; because promotion was more common in the Air Force, Air Force personnel more often felt entitled to promotion. This case of satisfaction with promotion makes many sociologists think that all satisfaction depends on social comparison and thus also life satisfaction.

Social comparison theory (see Fujita, Chapter 12, this volume) is a variant of a wider comparison theory that links up with the above-mentioned notion that subjective well-being is the difference between life-as-it-is and how-life-should-be. The smaller these discrepancies are, the higher the subjective well-being is assumed to be. In this theory there can be multiple discrepancies; among other things, discrepancies between what one has and what one thinks that one could have, and discrepancies between what one has and what one feels entitled to (Michalos, 1985). Perceptions of what one could have and what would be fair to have are seen to draw on social comparison. In this view, subjective well-being is a matter of keeping up with the Joneses; we feel well if we do better and bad if we do worse.

In this theory there is little hope for achieving greater happiness for a greater number,

because improving the living conditions for all will also improve the life of the Joneses, leaving the relative differences what they are. Social comparison is one of the mechanisms in the idea that we are on a "hedonic treadmill" that presumably nullifies all progress (Brickman & Campbell, 1971), and it is the main mechanism in Easterlin's (1974) theory that economic growth does not add to subjective well-being. In this view we can, at best, mitigate the effects of social comparison somewhat if we make the differences less visible. In this line Frank (1999) has advised that conspicuous consumption should be discouraged with heavy taxes on luxury goods. Limiting advertisement is also suggested in this context, in particular, commercials that use pictures of a life that is out of reach for the common person (Layard, 2005).

2.2.1 Theoretical Plausibility

There are several problems with this theory. First of all it is clear that social comparison does not apply to all subjective appraisal. When I hit my finger with a hammer, I feel pain—and it does not hurt less if neighbor Jones does the same. When appraising our situation, we use various sources of information, and social comparison is only one of these.

This point brings us to the question of what value social comparison provides for assessing how well one lives. Obviously, that value is limited to aspects of life in which social comparison is possible, such as your income. Social comparison is not so relevant for evaluating the less visible aspects of life, such as your sex life or the pleasure you take from watching the sunset. Where comparison with the Joneses is practicable, it informs us about what is possible in life but not necessarily about what is desirable or enjoyable. Looking over the fence of my neighbor, I can see that I lag behind in the number of beer cans emptied, but this does not tell me whether I would be better off if I drank more. Advocates of social comparison theory would retort that we compare only in areas that are socially valued in society, such as money and fame, and this reality links up with the assumption that notions of the good life are socially constructed. Yet even if beer boozing were highly valued in my society, and if I wholeheartedly supported that value, I would end up less well if I drank more than my dipsomaniacal neighbor. That is evident because drinking too much is bad for the body, irrespective of how I think about it. This example illustrates a major flaw in comparison theory: It forgets that we are biological organisms.

Obviously we cannot feel well if our body is harmed. Affective alarms start ringing when we do not get enough food or when our temperature falls too low. Less obvious but no less existent are psychological needs, such as the need to belong and to use and develop our potentials. We feel lousy when lonely and bored when unchallenged. Humans are not born as a tabula rasa, on which socialization imprints culture-specific wants; we are prewired to need some things and as a result feel good when these needs are met.

In this respect we are very much like our fellow animals. Dogs and cats can also feel good or bad and evidently do not calculate their subjective well-being by comparing shared standards of the good life. Evolution has simply programmed them to feel good or bad subjectively in situations that are good or bad for their survival objectively. Our affective system is not much different from that of dogs and cats, and also serves to make us do intuitively what is good for us. Human cognition has developed on top of this affective program and allows us to reflect on affective signals and even to ignore them to some extent. Yet this is not to say that cognition has replaced affective experience. Without affective information we are conatively blind; we cannot choose and cannot come to an overall judgment (Damasio, 1994).

I have discussed this alternative "need theory" of happiness elsewhere (Veenhoven, 1995, 2000a). This theory is also called "livability theory," and in this case the emphasis is on the conditions that allow for need gratification. Together with Lucas, Diener has reviewed

the strong and weak points of this theory (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Though alien to mainstream sociology', this latter view on subjective well-being would fit sociobiology; to my knowledge this field of sociology has not yet considered the issue.

2.2.2 *Fit with Facts*

Social comparison is at best one piece of information in appraisals of subjective well-being, and it is an empirical question to determine how much it matters. We can see how much when considering some implications of the theory. One testable implication of social comparison theory is that people typically are neither positive nor negative about their life. If we feel good because we do better than the Joneses, then the Joneses must feel bad because they do worse. This trend must manifest in an average around neutral in general population samples. Yet survey data do not support this prediction; average subjective well-being is far above neutral in modern nations.

Another implication is that subjective well-being must be higher among people who do well on socially valued standards. This is not always the case, however. Though people in high-status jobs are typically happier than people in low-status occupations (Veenhoven, 2006c: O1), there is no correlation between subjective well-being and level of education (Veenhoven, 2006c: E1). Likewise, there is only modest correlation between subjective well-being and income, and this correlation is at least partly due to an effect of the former on the latter, happiness adding to earning chances (Veenhoven, 2006c: I1) However, subjective well-being does appear to depend on things that have little to do with social comparison, as we will see below.

3. QUESTION 3: WHAT CONDITIONS FOSTER SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING?

Dealing with this question, sociologists first look at social conditions. At the macro level they look at characteristics of society, such as industrialization and individualization, and take particular interest in variations in state organization, such as welfare state regimes. Looking at conditions for happiness within societies, sociologists look at people's position on the social ladder, at their participation in public institutions, and at their embedding in private networks.

3.1 Modernity

Sociology developed in the turmoil of transition from an agrarian to an industrial society and this has focused attention on problems of modernization. Sociologists conducted incisive studies about the agonies of working-class people in the early phase of industrialization, about discrimination of migrants and the perils of life in growing cities. There are also insightful accounts of moral disorganization and the decline of the family. This research on modern misery has fueled the idea that life was better in the "good old days." Every year I ask my sociology students whether they think that modernization has made society more livable, and invariably the majority thinks that this is not the case,

A common theory behind this idea of withering well-being is that we humans are prewired for strong social networks, such as small communities, close-knit families, and a united church. Many sociologists were raised with Tönnies's (1979) distinction between traditional "Gemeinschaft" and modern "Gesellschaft" and heard their professors tell them that the former is more livable than the latter (though Tönnies himself saw the development to Gesellschaft as an improvement). Hence it is no surprise to find sociologists at the head of the communitarian movement that aims to "bring community back in society" (Etzioni, 1993).

Are we really prewired for a life in "strong" social networks? The pattern of cohesive communities, extended families, and a strong church is characteristic of agrarian societies but not of the hunter-gatherer society from which the human species has evolved. Hunter-gatherer societies are rather characterized by "weak" social ties, shifting bands being common in such societies, as is serial monogamy. Exertion of power is limited in hunter-gatherer existence, and social relations are therefore largely based on exchange and attraction. Seen in this light, modern individualized *Gesellschaft* may fit human nature better than traditional collectivist *Gemeinschaft*. Maryanski and Turner (1992) make this point convincingly in their seminal study *The Social Cage*, which documents the human preference for weak ties with findings from anthropology and ethnology. They show how the agrarian revolution forced humans into an oppressing social system (the social cage) and explain why people massively turned their back on pastoral *Gemeinschaft* once the industrial revolution provided a way out.

We cannot assess the subjective well-being of our ancestors, but anthropological archeology has found indications of their physical condition. Longevity appears not to have risen after the agrarian revolution, whereas health deteriorated (Sanderson, 1995). This shift marks a quality dip in human history. As we all know, the industrial revolution has been followed by an unprecedented rise in longevity that still goes on today and that also involves a steady rise in the number of years lived in good health. Less well known is the fact that subjective well-being has also risen. This rise appears in the comparison of more and less modern nations at the present time and also is the trend in modern nations over the last 40 years (Veenhoven, 2005a, 2006b).

So there is truth in the notion that societal development may go against human nature and reduce subjective well-being. Yet, contrary to what most sociologists believe, this reduction happened not after the industrial revolution, but thousands of years earlier in the wake of the agrarian revolution. In contrast, modernization appears to have boosted subjective well-being.

3.2 Welfare State

Many sociologists work for institutions of the welfare state. This context fosters a tendency among sociologists to equate public welfare with well-being. In The Netherlands they even denote these two concepts with the same word (*welzijn*). In this line it is assumed that subjective well-being is higher in extended welfare states such as Sweden than in residual welfare states such as the United States, and that this status is believed to be particularly true for "vulnerable" people, such as the aged and unemployed. This theory is not unchallenged, however; for instance, Murray (1984) argues that lavish welfare is inefficient and causes people to go "from the frying pan into the fire".

Empirical research shows no higher subjective well-being in welfare states than in otherwise comparable nations where "Father State" is less open-handed. Surprisingly there is also no difference in inequality of subjective well-being, as measured using the standard deviation of happiness. This absence of a difference appears both in a comparison of nations in the early 1990s and in a comparison over time within nations (Veenhoven, 2000b). An analysis that focused on the unemployed, in particular, yielded the same result (Ouweneel, 2000). These findings may mean that there is some truth in both theoretical positions and that the positive and negative effects of state welfare balance out.

3.3 Social Inequality

The development of sociology was also influenced by the emancipation movements of the 20th century, first of laborers and then of women and ethnic minorities. Though these

movements have been successful to a great extent, inequality is still the main issue in sociology. In this line, sociologists tend to think of subjective well-being in terms of inequality; people who feel bad are assumed to be deprived in some way, and people who are deemed to be deprived are assumed to feel bad.

Social inequality is commonly defined as differential "access to scarce resources," and the resources typically mentioned in social textbooks are income, power, and prestige. Income differences are most prominent in the discourse on social inequality, in particular, differences at the bottom of the income distribution. The tradition of poverty research in sociology stresses the adverse effects of income inequality on well-being and warns of a growing split in society between haves and have-nots.

It is evident that social inequality can reduce subjective well-being, particularly of the deprived. Yet it is not so evident that all inequalities do and that income inequality is a main thread to subjective well-being in modern society. Cocaine is a scarce resource in most Western nations, and there are clear differences in access to it, but people who can easily get cocaine do not stand out as having greater subjective well-being. Not everything that is scarce is beneficial; a point that may also apply to socially valued luxury goods such as big cars, second houses, and fancy holidays. Remember the above discussion on social comparison. It seems more plausible that inequality hurts only when it interferes with the gratification of basic needs, such as our need for food or respect.

The first sociological surveys on subjective well-being were conducted in the context of marketing research for the welfare state and were expected to show suffering among the deprived. However, this finding failed to appear in the data. As mentioned above, subjective well-being is only marginally related to socioeconomic position in modern nations. Subjective well-being is more strongly related to socioemotional position, that is, ties with friends, family, and clubs. Yet these are not "scarce resources," of which only limited amounts are available.

Another surprise is that there is no correlation between the degree of income inequality in nations and average subjective well-being (Berg, 2006). Apparently, we can live with big disparities in income. This accommodation does not mean that we can live equally well with all forms of inequality; for example, gender inequality in nations does go with lower average well-being. In this case it is not only the women who suffer, men are also less happy in gender-segregated nations (Chin Hon Foei, 2006).

Still another unexpected outcome is that inequality in happiness, as measured with the standard deviation, appears to have decreased in modern nations over the last 40 years (Veenhoven, 2005c). That finding is in flat contradiction with the sociological theory of the "new inequality" rising in modern society.

3.4 Social Participation

Sociologists are also concerned about the involvement of individuals in society. Many sociologists work for organizations that try to engage people in their communities and the political process. Though this work is done for the benefit of institutions in the first place, it is generally believed that individual citizens also profit from social participation (e.g., Putnam, 2000); remember the above-noted tendency of sociologists to put different varieties of the good in one hat. Several mechanisms have been mentioned in this context; one is that social participation creates "social capital" that can be used to "produce" subjective well-being. Another presumed mechanism is that social participation is rewarding in itself, not only because it involves rewarding contacts with other people, but also because it fosters a sense of having control and being part of society.

Sociological intuition fits the data better in this case. Comparative studies at the nation level show higher subjective well-being in nations with a well-functioning democracy

and dense networks of voluntary associations (Veenhoven, 2004). Studies among individuals in nations show invariably that active members of clubs and churches report greater subjective well-being than nonmembers or passive members (Veenhoven, 2006c: S6-8). Unfortunately, the available data do not give us information about cause and effect, so the correlation could be due largely to effects of happiness, which would fit Fredrickson's (2004) "broaden and build" theory.

This is not to say that more participation is always better and certainly not that participation in the public sphere is most conducive to subjective well-being. We see this point in the case of work life. Paid work is often praised as required for subjective well-being, but the data show that many can live without paid work. For example, retirement does not seem to reduce subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 2006c: R2), and full-time homemakers have been found to be happier than working mothers (Veenhoven, 2006c: E2.2.1). Only among male breadwinners are the employed at an advantage (Veenhoven, 2006c: E2). Still another point to note in this context is that subjective well-being appears to be lowest in the phase of life where participation in public life is highest. Comparison of subjective well-being across age groups reveals a U-shaped pattern of people feeling best in their early 20s and after age 50, and worst in the midyears of life when they are most involved in work.

3.5 Social Support

Though private life is not the prime domain of Western sociology, there is a long tradition of research into family ties and a more recent body of research on friendship. Subjective well-being is a common theme in this context. It is generally assumed that we need such "primary" ties and that subjective well-being depends on the availability and quality of the ties. Again, several causal mechanisms have been hypothesized to be involved. One of these is that intimates "support" us materially and immaterially (e.g., Putnam, 2000) Among the immaterial kinds of support are information, emotional backing, and behavioral correction. Another theory holds that family relations protect against negative labeling as a deviant.

Empirical research has indeed shown strong relations between intimate ties and subjective well-being, and in this case there is also evidence for causal effects of the former on the latter (e.g., Lucas, Clark, Diener, & Georgellis, 2003). The causal mechanism seems to be social support rather than protection against negative stereotyping (Veenhoven, 1989), a finding that is still another indication that cognitive theories of subjective well-being fall short.

4. QUESTION 4: WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF FEELING WELL OR NOT?

Research on subjective well-being has focused on its determinants in search of an answer to the question of how it can be advanced. Another issue is the consequences of subjective well-being, which is relevant to answering the question of whether subjective well-being should be furthered.

This is a topic in the psychology of subjective well-being and, in particular, in the recent field of positive psychology. Together with Lyubomirsky, Diener has published a review of the literature that shows positive effects on various aspects of human functioning, such as creativity, social contacts, work performance, and physical health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The data fit well with the above-mentioned theory that subjective well-being "broadens" and "builds" (Fredrickson, 2004); broadening means that subjective well-being widens our perceptual horizon, and building means that it facilitates the formation of resources.

Sociologists have not given much thought on this topic as yet, and mainstream opinion is still largely guided by the tale of the Brave New World (Huxley, 1932), in which subjective well-being goes hand in hand with superficial consumerism, political apathy, and general ignorance. That story fits the theory that subjective well-being is a mere cognitive illusion that does not root in real quality of life. Sociologists see typically more value in discontent, which they regard as the seed of personal motivation and social change.

5. IS SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING A SUBJECT FOR SOCIOLOGY?

Some of my colleague sociologists feel that the subject of subjective well-being should be left to psychology, because it is a mental state and not a condition of society. I think they are wrong.

One reason is that the subjective well-being of individuals entails important information about the quality of the social system in which they live. If people typically feel bad, the social system is apparently not well suited for human habitation. One of the aims of sociology is to contribute to a better society, and the study of subjective well-being provides clues for a more livable society (Veenhoven 2004). This inductive approach to the good society is also a counterpoise to the speculative theorizing about the good society and an antidote against the ideological prepossessions on that matter. There is a rising demand for information about social conditions that foster subjective well-being among policymakers because, among other reasons, the great ideologies have lost appeal.

Another reason why sociologists should be more concerned about subjective well-being is that it is one of the determinants of social behavior. Most sociologists would be surprised to learn that happy people are typically better citizens, that they are better informed about political matters, that they use their voting rights more often, that they involve themselves more in civil action and are, at the same time, less radical in their political views (Lyubomirsky & Diener 2005). Clearly, these attributes are relevant for understanding the functioning of the democratic system. Subjective well-being is also likely to affect the functioning of other social systems, such as work organizations and friendship networks. So, individual subjective wellbeing is both an outcome social systems and a factor in their functioning. As such the subject belongs to the core business of sociology.

NOTES

¹ The collection of "Correlational Findings" in the World Database of Happiness is sorted by subject. Subject sections are indicated with a capital letter and a number; for example, A4 for findings on happiness and Age,

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