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CULTURAL BIAS IN RATINGS OF PERCEIVED
LIFE QUALITY

A comment on Ostroot & Snijder

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ABSTRACT. The results of comparative surveys have demonstrated great differences of perceived life quality. Yet there is doubt whether these differences mean that people are really more satisfied in one country than in another. It is generally believed that the responses are distorted by factors such as language, familiarity with concepts like satisfaction, and social desirability pressures. Though often alleged, the truth of these charges has not yet been demonstrated empirically.

Ostroot & Snijder (1985) now claim to have demonstrated that about 40% of the difference in satisfaction between the French and Americans is due to 'cultural bias': in particular to a rosier outlook of the latter. Yet their arguments labor under two defects: Firstly, their use of the word 'bias' is misleading. They do not demonstrate any discrepancy between avowed satisfaction and 'true' satisfaction. Speaking of a 'cultural effect' would be more appropriate. Secondly, Ostroot & Snyder do not demonstrate that the greater satisfaction of Americans is due to a rosier outlook on their part. The data do not allow the conclusion that Americans hold a rosier view than the French, nor that such a view is responsible for their greater satisfaction.

Cross-national studies on perceived quality of life have revealed great differences between countries. Americans, for instance, report more satisfaction with their lives than the Japanese (Cantril, 1965:184; Gallup, 1976:465) and the Danish avow themselves happier than Italians (Inglehart, 1977a: 153). In Western Europe the difference between countries was even greater than the difference in happiness between social categories within the individual countries (Inglehart, 1977b:442). These differences are quite intriguing. They suggest that the main social determinants of happiness are at the macro level, rather than at the meso and micro levels where most investigators look for them. Yet the differences are regarded with suspicion. It is generally believed that they are biased in some way.

PRESUMED SOURCES OF CULTURAL BIAS

The literature on cross-cultural comparison of attitudes enumerates various potential sources of bias. Three of these have figures in the discussions on

the trustworthiness of cross-national differences in ratings of perceived life quality:

Language

Firstly, seemingly similarly questions may have slightly different connotations in one language than in another and may thus produce differences in response which do not reflect real differences in satisfaction. As yet this bias has appeared minimal. In his above-mentioned analysis of West-European survey data Inglehart (1977a:154/6) found no differences in the responses of Flemish and French speaking Belgians, nor between Swiss respondents of different tongues. Similarly, Bishen & Atkinson (1980:31) found little difference in avowed life satisfaction between French and English speaking Canadians.

Familiarity with the Notion of Subjective Well-Being

A second source of bias can be a varying familiarity with concepts such as 'happiness' and 'satisfaction'. These concepts may be more current in individualistic and hedonistic Western countries than in non-Western nations. Responses to questions on this issue might therefore be more positive in the former countries than in the latter, non-Western people tending to react reservedly to so alien an idea. Elsewhere I have discussed this objection (Veenhoven, 1984:143). If it is true we can expect higher non-response rates in non-Western countries. I therefore inspected the non-response on questions about perceived life quality in the Gallup-Kettering world survey. No differences appeared. This lack of difference in non-response on satisfaction items is not a question of non-Western respondents being too polite not to answer. Questions on other issues sometimes did yield high non-response rates in non-Western countries: in fact equally high as in Western nations.

Social Desirability

Thirdly, desirability effects may distort the responses. Two such effects have been suggested. One is a presumed tendency of the Americans to present themselves happier than they really are, American culture demanding cheerfulness. This effect has often been held responsible for the relatively high

happiness scores in the U.S. Another desirability effect has been suggested by Kenji Iijima (1982:5/6). Trying to account for the relatively low happiness scores in Japan, he suggests that Japanese society places a premium on modesty and conformity. The Japanese would therefore score more frequently on the middle categories of rating scales. Neither of these claims has been substantiated as yet.

OSTROOT & SNYDER'S CLAIM OF 'ROSY-OUTLOOK DISTORTION'

Recently Ostroot & Snyder (1985) have contributed to this discussion. They claim to have demonstrated that almost half of the differences in perceived life quality between the French and Americans is due to 'cultural bias'. They base their conclusion on a comparison of surveys in an American town (Springfield, Illinois) and a comparable town in France (Aix-en-Provence). These surveys included identical questions about the satisfaction with various domains of life. In line with earlier results Americans reported significantly more satisfaction than the French (0.5 points on a 4-step rating scale). Ostroot and Snyder presume that this difference is partly due to a greater tendency among the Americans to look through 'rose-colored glasses' (p. 245). They try to assess the extent to which this tendency accounts for the differences.

In doing so they started from the assumption that a rosy outlook on oneself reveals itself in a rosy outlook on others. They therefore asked their French and American respondents how they think people in other countries feel about life. Perceived life quality in four countries was rated: in India, Mexico, Japan and Sweden. The Americans rated consistently higher: 0.2 point on a 4-step rating scale. On this basis Ostroot & Snyder conclude that 40% of the difference in perceived quality of their own life is due to bias: 0.2 being 40% of the 0.5 difference.

Does this really prove their point? I don't think so.

Does 'Attribution of Satisfaction' Indicate a 'Rosy Outlook'?

Ostroot & Snyder measure the assumed difference in the rose-coloredness of of American and French glasses by the degree in which the former attribute more satisfaction to people in other countries than the latter. It is true that Americans gave somewhat higher levels of satisfaction than the French, but

is that difference due to a more pronounced tendency on their part to see the sunny side of things? That is possible, but not proven. The data allow another explanation as well.

Suppose that Americans are not more inclined to see things from the bright side than the French, but for various other reasons are nevertheless more satisfied with their lives. It is then still possible that they expect people in other countries to be more satisfied than the French do. Because they are happier than the French, they may be more inclined to attribute happiness to others.

Attributional effects of one's own happiness have been demonstrated by Goldings (1954:42). He found that 'moderately happy' people tend to rate faces on photographs as happy as themselves (complementary projection), whereas 'very happy' and 'very unhappy' persons tend to contrast projection. If these laboratory observations apply to the survey data at hand, they can explain them reasonably well.

The complementary attributions of the moderately satisfied are likely to dominate the scene, both because the moderates represent the bulk of the respondents and because the contrast-projections at the extremes tend to neutralize each other in the average scores. The American public consisting of more 'moderately' satisfied persons than the French, it is then understandable that Americans attribute more satisfaction to people in other countries.

Is a Rosy Outlook Responsible for Greater Satisfaction?

Suppose Ostroot & Snyder are nevertheless correct in their hunch that Americans are more inclined to see the sunny side of things than the French, is that rosier outlook then responsible for their greater satisfaction? Not necessarily so. It is equally well possible that Americans are more satisfied for other reasons, e.g., because American society fits human needs better than the French. The greater satisfaction with their own life can then generalize into a greater inclination to see the positive side of everything. In this view the prevalence of a rosy outlook is a by-product of a happy culture rather than a veil over unhappiness.

Cultural 'Bias' or Cultural 'Effect'?

Let us once more suppose that Ostroot & Snyder are right and that the greater

satisfaction of Americans is indeed a result of their greater inclination to see things from the bright side. Is American satisfaction then exposed as 'biased'?

The use of the word 'bias' is misleading in this context. It suggests a deviation from some truth: in this case either a deviation from what one 'really feels' or a discrepancy with some axiomatic 'standard of the good life'. Yet nothing of this kind has been demonstrated. Ostroot & Snyder use the term 'cultural bias' in fact as a generic label for all effects on perceived life quality other than the usual socio-economic ones (p. 241).

It makes more sense saying that a rosy outlook *produces* more positive perceptions of life, and that a culture that focuses attention on the good and the pleasant mostly allows more satisfaction to its members than one which preaches suffering and doom. A rosy outlook on life is then a 'cultural determinant' of perceived life quality, irrespective of whether this optimism is justified or not.

CONCLUSION

Ostroot & Snyder suggest that cross-national differences in ratings of perceived life quality are grossly inflated by cultural bias, but fail to prove their point.

Firstly, they do not prove that Americans look at the world through rosier glasses than the French. Their data allow another interpretation as well.

Secondly, the possibly rosier view of the American is not necessarily responsible for the greater satisfaction in the USA. It is equally well possible that the former results from the latter.

Thirdly, even if the greater satisfaction of Americans is due to their rosier outlook, 'bias' is not necessarily involved. Deviation from any 'true' quality of life not having been demonstrated, Ostroot & Snyder might do better to speak of a 'cultural effect' in this case rather than of 'cultural bias'.

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