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Ed DIENER

William TOV

Singapore Management University, williamtov@smu.edu.sg

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Well-Being on Planet Earth

Ed Diener

University of Illinois and the Gallup Organization

William Tov

Singapore Management University

Abstract

The Gallup World Poll allows a look at how humanity is flourishing, based on the answers of survey respondents sampled from across the globe. Several conclusions are clear. First, how people are doing depends enormously on the society in which they live, and nations vary from doing very well to extremely poorly. In terms of subjective well-being, nations vary greatly, in both judgments of overall life and in positive and negative emotions. The best predictors of global life judgments were income and ownership of modern conveniences, whereas the best predictors of emotions were social factors such as the control of corruption and being able to count on others, and personal factors such as learning new things and being able to control one's day. Thus, the answer to the question of whether money makes people happy must be qualified by the measure of well-being that is being used. It is proposed that systematic measures of well-being across and within nations would allow individuals, leaders, and policy makers to make better decisions.

Keywords: Subjective well-being, income, money, quality of life, national well-being

The Gallup World Poll, begun in 2005 and continuing each year, has surveyed representative samples of about 1,000 people in 140 nations. The samples include both urban and rural areas, and are based on telephone surveys in highly economically developed nations and on door-to-door surveys in most nations. The poll has succeeded in gaining responses that represent 98% of the world's population, and is thus the first accurate look at how humanity feels about life.

✉ Ed Diener, 603 E. Daniels St., Champaign, IL 61820 U.S.A., Phone: (217) 333-4804, Fax: (217) 244-5876. E-mail: ediener@cyrus.psych.uiuc.edu or request from www.psych.uiuc.edu/~ediener

Some Objective Facts

The sample allows us to determine some basic facts about the world, such as the possession of modern conveniences. Table 1 shows the percent of households in the world (weighting the poll sample by the population of each country) that possess various conveniences, as well as the percent who have experienced various events.

Table 1. The percent of households in the world¹ that possess various conveniences and the percent who have experienced various events

Modern Conveniences & Experiences	%
Running Water	66.0
Electricity	87.0
Television	79.0
Telephone	53.1
Computer	17.0
Gone hungry in past year	16.2
Been assaulted in past year	5.8
Can count on someone in an emergency	79.8

Note: ¹ Weighting the poll sample by the population of each country

Another way to examine the results, however, is to examine the variability across societies. Table 2 presents the best and worst nation on selected variables, and reveals the tremendous diversity of experience across the globe.

Table 2. The best and worst nation on selected variables

Selected Variables	Best Nation	%	Worst Nation	%	N ¹
Cannot afford housing	Cyprus	3.0	Cambodia	69.0	124
Cannot afford medical care	Japan	4.2	Romania	48.7	31
Cannot afford food	Austria	3.3	Malawi	75.8	127
Gone hungry in the past year	Austria	0.4	Chad	78.1	95
Been assaulted in past year	Japan	0.4	Burundi	33.2	128
Can count on someone in an emergency	United States	97.9	Togo	43.5	130
Able to do what you do best everyday	Costa Rica	93.9	Bangladesh	56.9	120
Able to choose how to spend time yesterday	Honduras	87.3	Iran	40.6	131
Learned something new yesterday	Honduras	79.2	Bangladesh	17.4	131

¹ Number of nations

Obviously, a real challenge for world leaders and behavioral scientists alike is to seek solutions that will bring the worst nations up to the level of the best nations.

Subjective Well-Being

Nations dramatically differ also on reports of well-being. In the first wave of the World Poll there were four types of measures of subjective well-being:

Cantril's (1965) Ladder – A zero to 10 scale with the numbers indicated on the steps of a ladder, where 0 is the worst possible life the respondent can imagine for him or herself, and 10 the best life she or he can imagine for her or himself.

Pleasant emotions were assessed by two questions: Whether the respondent enjoyed most of yesterday, and whether he or she laughed and smiled a lot yesterday.

Unpleasant emotions were assessed by a number of negative feelings experienced yesterday, but for the purposes of this report we averaged depression, worry, and anger.

Domain Satisfaction – Respondents indicated whether they were satisfied, in a yes/no format, with four elements of their lives – health, job, housing, and standard of living – and we averaged these (where "No" = 0 and "Yes" = 1). Table 3 shows the best, worst, and world averages for those measures of subjective well-being. The world average is weighted by the population of nations.

Table 3. The best, worst, and world averages for measures of subjective well-being

Well-Being Measures	World Average	Best Nation	Worst Nation	N ¹
Cantril's Ladder (0-10)	5.29	Denmark 8.0	Togo 3.2	132
Pleasant Emotions (0-1)	.74	Laos .89	Georgia .44	130
Unpleasant Emotions (0-1)	.22	Taiwan .09	Armenia .47	129
Domain satisfaction (0-1)	.73	Ireland .92	Uganda .37	130

¹ Number of nations

The above table again shows the huge variability that exists across the globe. It is interesting to note that humanity scores higher on emotional well-being than on judgments of life. For judgments, 59% of countries are above the neutral midpoint of the ladder scale (5.0), whereas 100% of countries have a positive score on affect balance, meaning that they reported more positive than negative emotions. We will

soon discuss the distinction between the judgment and affect measures in terms of "wanting" versus "liking", and the results here suggest that people in the world are worse off in having what they want (primarily, it seems, defined in material terms) than they are in liking what they have (enjoying life).

What Predicts Well-Being?

A perennial question is the degree to which money affects happiness. Many have mentioned that money is not important to happiness, at least above the poverty level, but our results tell a more nuanced story.

If one examines Ladder scores, at both the individual level and nation level, they are predicted very strongly by income (see also Diener, Ng, & Tov, 2009). Similarly, the Ladder correlates highly with the meeting of basic needs (for food and housing) and the ownership of modern conveniences. Table 4 shows the correlation of these variables with the various forms of subjective well-being.

Table 4. The correlation of these variables with the various form of subjective well-being

Material Variables	Cantril's Ladder	Domain Satisfaction	Pleasant Emotions	Unpleasant Emotions
Income				
Individual	.38*	.27*	.13*	-.06*
Nation	.74*	.68*	.52*	-.14
Basic Needs				
Individual	.28*	.34*	.19*	-.18*
Nation	.75*	.73*	.39*	-.18
Modern Conveniences ¹				
Individual	.31*	.28*	.15*	-.04*
Nation	.76*	.68*	.25*	.06

Notes: * $p < .05$. ¹ Conveniences were the sum of running water, electricity, telephone, and television.

The Ladder and Domain Satisfaction scores seem to heavily reflect material well-being, whereas there was much less use of the emotion measures.

Despite the importance of material prosperity for the judgment items, there was more to them than only prosperity. We regressed each measure of well-being on GDP per capita (Heston, Summers, & Aten, 2002) as well as variables related to social stability and intrinsically rewarding (paratelic) experiences. The social stability variables included: (1) the extent of corruption in a nation (Transparency International, 2007); (2) the percentage of respondents who had been assaulted in the past year; and (3) the percentage of respondent who had someone they could

count on in an emergency. The "paratelic" predictors were derived from the notion that some activities are inherently rewarding and engaging, separately from the goals they might attain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The paratelic variables consisted of the percentage of individuals in each country who (1) felt their work enabled them to do what they do best everyday; (2) were able to choose how they spent their time yesterday; and (3) learned or did something interesting yesterday.

Going beyond money, corruption, for example, predicted Ladder scores even controlling for income ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$). In addition, having others to count on, doing what one does best, and learning were also with positive evaluations on the Ladder (β 's = .22, .12, and .13, respectively, all p 's < .05). Low corruption, having others to count on, and doing what one does best were also associated with greater domain satisfaction (β 's = -.25, .25, and .38, respectively, all p 's < .05).

When we turn to the measures of affect, we see that predictors other than material affluence were also important. For unpleasant emotions, all social stability variables were significantly associated above and beyond GDP per capita. Corruption and assault were associated with greater levels of unpleasant emotions (β 's = .36 and .27, respectively, p 's < .02). Having others to count on was associated with less unpleasant emotions ($\beta = -.28, p < .05$). Greater freedom in choosing how to spend one's time was also associated with less unpleasant emotion (β 's = -.26, $p < .03$).

For pleasant emotions, both social stability and paratelic experiences were important. Corruption was a negative predictor (β 's = -.21, $p < .05$), probably due to the lack of trust in societies where corruption is widespread. Assault was also associated with less pleasant emotions ($\beta = -.17$), whereas having others to count on was positively associated with pleasant emotions ($\beta = .20$), both p 's < .05). The three "paratelic" variables associated with pleasant emotions. Both learning and choosing how to spend one's time were associated more positive emotions (β 's = .45 and .22, p 's < .01). Doing what one does best was marginally associated with pleasant emotions ($\beta = .15, p = .07$). In contrast, GDP per capita was not predictive of pleasant emotions ($\beta = -.07, n.s.$).

This suggests that social factors influence emotions, but being involved in interesting and challenging activities may be very important as well. Some caution is needed, however, in that we cannot be certain of the causal direction between the variables.

In sum, when it comes to life judgments there are some variables that predict beyond the powerful effects of money, but when it comes to affect there appear to be variables that are more important than money. This conclusion was affirmed by Diener, Ng, Harter, and Arora (in press), who found that life evaluations were closely tied to income and the ownership of material goods, but people's positive feelings were most associated with psychosocial factors such as the ability to count on others and learning new things.

Well-Being for Public Policy

Diener and Seligman (2004), in an article entitled "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being", proposed that societies establish systematic measures of well-being to help policy makers. They argued that policy makers often use economic measures and, at times, social indicators such as measures of crime and health, to guide policy making. Diener and Seligman argued that these other measures have significant blind spots that can be filled by measures of well-being.

In a book-length treatment of well-being measures for public policy, Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, and Helliwell (2009) review in detail the justifications for organizations and societies to use systematic accounts of subjective well-being. They discuss the validity of the well-being measures, as well as other concerns that have been raised about their use. Diener et al. review policy debates in four major areas – health and longevity, the environment, social life, and work and income – to show how well-being measures add concrete information that is relevant for current policy debates. For example, in the area of the environment, they show the impact of commuting, airport noise, public green spaces, and air pollution on subjective well-being.

If accounts of well-being were instituted, this would not be relevant only to those working in the field of subjective well-being. The publication of the measures would help ordinary citizens to make better decisions in their everyday lives, for example in making clear the costs in well-being of heavy commuting. Furthermore, the accounts of well-being would make more prominent in the public consciousness factors besides money. The well-being reports would also help those working in the behavioral and social sciences because they would highlight the importance of the variables they study. Virtually all areas studied by social and behavioral scientists have the potential for creating societal improvements, which will often be revealed by the well-being measures. Thus, accounts of subjective well-being can benefit not only the citizens of a society, but also will highlight the type of interventions and applications that derive from the human sciences.

Take-Home Message

The Gallup World Poll reveals to use the quality of life of humanity, including levels of subjective well-being. Although past studies have highlighted individual differences in the causes of well-being, the World Poll shows that differences in society can make an enormous difference in levels of subjective well-being. The differences in well-being between societies are as large as the differences between very happy and depressed individuals. The role of institutions and societies should not be underplayed in our attempts to understand and improve the world. The World Poll reveals the importance of economic development to well-being, but also highlights the importance of other factors such as social and "paratelic" variables

for producing well-being. While material development helps give people some of the things they desire and consider to be part of the ideal life, other factors are very important in whether people experience the life they lead as enjoyable.

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