39. World Happiness Report: origins, purpose, contents, impact and future

Origins

The first *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012) was written to provide the scientific background to support a High Level Meeting at the United Nations in April 2012, convened under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley of Bhutan, to further the implementation of the Bhutan-sponsored General Assembly Resolution of 19 July 2011 that 'called on United Nations Member States to undertake steps that give more importance to happiness and wellbeing in determining how to achieve and measure social and economic development.'[1]

In the wake of the General Assembly Resolution, a meeting of experts was convened in Thimphu in late July of 2011, co-chaired by Prime Minister Thinley and Jeffrey Sachs, adviser to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, to consider what needed to be done next to develop the happiness and wellbeing agenda. To support the UN High-Level meeting being planned for April 2012, there was agreed to be a need for a document setting out the available international data on subjective wellbeing, and bringing together the various threads of empirical research on the sources of national happiness. The report was to be prepared by the three founding editors and other colleagues in time for release at the beginning of the meeting in April 2012. It was never intended to be an official UN document, given the speed with which it had to be written and produced. The out-of-pocket costs were covered by repurposed academic grants to the founding editors at their respective universities, with the Earth Institute at Columbia University as the production base. The fast and wide take-up of the Report suggested that there was a previously unmet interest for a document combining data and research to illustrate what it might mean to implement the UN Resolution to make happiness and wellbeing a central focus of policy attention. The second report followed 18 months later, being launched at Columbia University in October 2013, with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network as the publisher. The third report came after another 18 months. During the New York launch event for the third report, it was suggested that subsequent reports should be released annually, on or near 20 March, the International Day of Happiness that had recently been established by the United Nations. This entailed a gap of only ten months between the third and fourth reports, so that the 4th report, which was launched at a three-day series of events in Rome, was described as an update and accompanied by a companion volume of papers by Italian scholars. The Reports have subsequently been released at annual intervals, always close to 20 March, twice at the United Nations (in 2017 and 2019), once at the Vatican (in 2018), and virtually for the COVID-affected years since 2020. As the range of sponsoring foundations has grown, and new editors added, there has also been a range of supplementary events throughout the world.

Looking back to 2011, four supporting pillars of opinion, research, and available global data can be seen to have converged to support the UN Resolution, the High-Level Meeting, and the first and subsequent World Happiness Reports.

The first was the Bhutanese decision to use Gross National Happiness, (in contrast to Gross National Product, or GNP) as a focus for its development efforts. This led to a series of international Gross National Happiness conferences in the first decade of the millennium, and a GNH Index, described in a case study of Bhutan (Ura et al 2012) in the first *World Happiness Report*.

Second, there was already growing dissatisfaction with using GDP per capita as a sufficient measure of human progress (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009). This dissatisfaction was spurred partly by its inadequacies as a measure of economic welfare (Nordhaus and Tobin 1972) and partly by human welfare depending on factors beyond GDP, including environmental sustainability (Carson 1962), inequality (Atkinson 1975), fairness (Rawls 1975), and the quality of the social context (Putnam et al. 1992). There were also the competing attractions of broader conceptions of human welfare, such as happiness (Aristotle, e.g. Annas 1993).

Third, there was two fast-growing strands of academic research, one in economics (e.g. Easterlin 1974) and the other in positive

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psychology (e.g. Diener et al. 1999), providing evidence that the quality of people's lives can be coherently and reliably assessed by a variety of subjective wellbeing measures.

The fourth pillar, and a vital one, was data, and especially that provided by the Gallup World Poll. Important earlier international comparisons of subjective wellbeing were enabled by the successive rounds of the World Values Survey since the early 1980s, by the European Social Survey since 2002, and the Eurobarometer since 1973. But for the range of country coverage, frequency, comparability, and the range of relevant other variables, nothing matches the Gallup World Poll, started in 2005 as a long-term project to improve the range and quality of data to support global development. The quality of the Gallup World Poll questions was greatly enhanced by Gallup's two key outside scientific advisors, Ed Diener and Danny Kahneman. When the OECD convened a meeting of National Statistical Offices in Florence in 2009 to discuss ways to introduce subjective wellbeing into official surveys, Gallup experts were important contributors, and the Gallup World Poll data was already central to the discussions about the future of wellbeing measurement. Among those who were convinced of the importance of measuring subjective wellbeing, there were two schools of thought, one favoring life evaluations (Layard 2005), and the other preferring more immediate measures of positive and negative affect, and their balance (Kahneman et al 2004). There was general agreement, however, that data should be collected for life satisfaction and both positive and negative emotions. The discussions in Florence led to the establishment of an OECD working group to prepare subjective wellbeing measurement guidelines for national statistical offices (OECD 2013). Although most OECD countries now include some of the recommended measures of subjective wellbeing in their surveys or can obtain such measures through EUSILC, the country range and comparability are still far below that provided by the Gallup World Poll.

Life evaluations are given a central role in the *World Happiness Reports* because they provide an umbrella that can enable comparisons of the relative importance of the supporting pillars for good lives. The *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-Being* (OECD 2013) also emphasized the need to measure life evaluations as a primary indicator, ideally in concert with monitoring affect (i.e., both positive and negative aspects of people's more daily emotions and experiences); 'Eudaimonia; (i.e. measures of life purpose); and other factors that have been found to support better lives (e.g., income, health, good jobs, family and friends, welcoming communities, good government, trust, and generosity). Having an umbrella measure of subjective wellbeing permits the relative importance of these factors supporting wellbeing to be assessed, making it possible to move beyond a general wish to improve wellbeing towards some specific policies with established credentials for supporting better lives.

As public interest in the reports and their rankings has grown, and as the reports have involved a broad range of experts and timely topics, editorial independence has been increasingly valuable. It has enabled fast analysis of the latest data while also insulating the United Nations and the Secretary General from complaints by countries and territories that have either not been included in the analysis or have not been happy with their positions in the annual listings. It is also helpful that the rankings themselves are based simply on the averages of the life evaluations by the survey respondents and are not an index of factors that support wellbeing – an approach that would require weightings reflecting the editorial opinions.

Purpose

Both before and after the release of the first *World Happiness Report* at the April 2012 UN meeting, attempts were made to sketch the possible implications of happiness research for public policies. This included special chapters in both the first and second reports (Chapter 4 in the first report, and O'Donnell 2013 in the second). A number of subsequent national and international efforts to develop a wellbeing policy framework are summarized in Durand and Exton (2019). Using happiness data and research to assess the value of political institutions and policies seems especially appropriate, since many national constitutions and most policy platforms relate to the quality of life, and the existence and re-election of democratic governments depend on maintaining a sufficient level of citizen satisfaction with the quality of life. Nonetheless, until recently most studies of the sources of

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electoral support have focused on economic conditions rather than more general measures of the quality of life. More recently, when comparisons have been made between economic performance and life satisfaction as determinants of electoral outcomes, the latter has been found to be more important (Chapter 3 of WHR 2019).

There are three key components required to support systematic attempts to design and evaluate government institutions and policies in terms of their likely effects on people's own assessments of the quality of their lives. The first is the collection of happiness data in sufficient detail to support research into the reasons why some neighborhoods and nations are happier than others. Relatively few countries are yet assessing subjective wellbeing in enough detail and frequency to support research sufficient to formulate policies focused on wellbeing. The data collected regularly and comparably in the Gallup World Poll permit the World Happiness Reports to include global analysis of the sources of happiness, and thereby to fuel interest in more widespread collection of data by national statistical agencies, ideally ensuring comparability by following guidelines of the sort established by the OECD (2013), and updated ten years later by Exton et al (2023).

Second, governments are unlikely to change their policy objectives unless supported by public opinion. There is already apparent support, in most countries, for a policy framework designed to deliver sustainability, as witnessed by the breadth of national commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals. Subjective wellbeing is included among the many goals, but more importantly has the potential for being used as an umbrella welfare measure to help to establish the relative importance of what otherwise risks being too many unrelated goals. In this important area, as in others, the availability of an empirically useful measure of individual and societal wellbeing can help to galvanize as well as direct public and political thought and actions.

Third, to effectively rank alternative ways to design and deliver public services requires a much broader and more comprehensive form of cost/benefit analysis. The basic idea is simple. Many policies have expected consequences for a variety of economic and social outcomes, for a range of beneficiaries, and with various ways of distributing the costs and efforts of policy design and delivery. Traditional cost/benefit analysis includes costs and consequences that are directly measured at market prices, with non-market outcomes such as the level of social trust in a community, which may be mentioned as being relevant, while being left out of the calculations used to support the ranking of alternative policies. To go further requires extending the evaluation of alternative policies to include their expected contributions to subjective wellbeing, using empirical research to establish the weights assigned to the various outcomes when measuring the overall costs and benefits. These practices are increasingly established within the policy green books and evaluation practices used in departments and cabinet offices in several countries and probably represent the most important shift required to implement a wellbeing approach to the evaluation and design of government institutions and policies (Frijters & Krekel 2021).

One advantage of focusing policy attention on wellbeing is that it exposes many win-win policy options for increasing happiness and decreasing misery. Much previous attention to inequality has focused on the distribution of income and wealth, with policy options involving targeted transfer of financial resources from the top to the bottom, sometimes angering those being taxed and stigmatizing the recipients. By contrast, creating happiness for those who have little does not require transfers from those who are already happier. In fact, recent research has shown that a wide range of prosocial actions are likely to improve the subjective wellbeing of both the givers and receivers of such kindness (for a recent survey, see Aknin et al. 2019), especially when under the volition of the donor. Furthermore, evidence in Chapter 2 of *World Happiness Report 2020* shows that average happiness is higher in countries where the distribution of happiness is more equal (Table 2.2 and also Goff et al. 2018) and that improvements in the quality of the social context improve life evaluations for all, but especially for those beset by discrimination, ill-health, unemployment, low income, and unsafe neighborhoods (Table 2.3, p. 35).

More generally, changes in the structure of government to increase the options for individuals and communities to share in the design and implementation of their own institutions are likely to improve outcomes

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in several ways, because such collaborations encourage engagement, increase the scope for innovation, and build social connections that raise subjective wellbeing above and beyond what they contribute to solving the specific problems at hand.

There is a growing range of evaluations of government policies intended to improve happiness in many policy areas. At the broadest level, the OECD has recommended that countries adopt a whole-of-government approach to improving wellbeing, supported by a broader and more systematic collection of wellbeing data, and the development and application of policy evaluation tools that use subjective wellbeing as the objective and as the means for comparing monetary and non-monetary costs and outcomes (Durand and Exton 2019). Within healthcare, using the happiness lens to evaluate different treatment alternatives has been advocated as a means of producing much better health and more happiness with less drain on scarce resources (Peasgood, Foster, and Dolan 2019). Within schools, positive education policies designed to produce better lives for students have been tested and affirmed in large-scale trials in countries around the world (Seligman and Adler 2019). Finally, a large variety of urban policies, frequently involving a mix of bottom-up and top-down collaboration to build successful communities, has exposed the importance and value of enabling people to work together in creating happier communities, especially in urban areas, where such connections require more innovation to create (Bin Bishr et al. 2019). There is a growing body of evidence illustrating feasible changes in the structure of government that are likely to improve population wellbeing, as measured by people's own life evaluations (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2019). What is required to move beyond the possible to the actual? There is widespread evidence that decision-makers tend to stick to time-tested procedures (Bilalic et al 2008). Risk minimization is the norm, and innovation remains exceptional, especially that required to build cross-silo cooperation. It is very hard to change the course of governments, especially when this requires top-to-bottom and ministry-to-ministry collaboration. Add in the growing climate of risk aversion, and innovation looks to be ever more difficult. Solutions could take different forms in different circumstances, typically starting small and experimental, providing freedom of action and innovation, and ideally involving cooperation across policy silos and from up and down the administrative structure (Helliwell 2019). It would probably be important to keep the initial efforts explicitly experimental, accepting that failures are to be expected in any well-designed learning strategy, and to give higher levels of government the distance and deniability they may at first require.

Although the logic of redesigning government to build happiness may be very strong, there is still much to be learned about the best ways of doing so. Opening the doors to innovation may be difficult, but it remains the essential next step. The related research agenda is both pressing and increasingly feasible as the range of available happiness data continues to grow alongside a parallel growth in policy interest.

One of the key purposes of the *World Happiness Reports* is to accelerate this policy agenda by broadening public awareness of the availability and reliability of subjective wellbeing data, thereby facilitating public interest in and demand for evidence-based government policies and private decisions that are designed to facilitate happier lives.

Contents

The 11 *World Happiness Reports* have all included a mix of in-house and invited chapters covering a range of issues central to the measurement and understanding of subjective wellbeing. The full contents of each report, with links to the supporting data, are posted on the WHR website (https://worldhappiness.report). Chapter 2 in each report presents the life evaluations data (averaged over three years to increase the sample size to about 3,000 respondents per country) on which the widely reported happiness rankings are based. Chapter 2 also contains the latest results from a statistical model, estimated using a pooled sample of annual national-level data covering all years since the start of the Gallup World Poll in 2005/2006, explaining life evaluations (using the Cantril ladder) and both positive and negative affect (emotions) in terms of six key variables. Many press reports and secondary publications presenting the rankings have incorrectly described them as being based on an index derived from the six variables used in the Chapter 2 model. In fact, the rankings are based only on the average values

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of the primary life evaluations made by the individual respondents. The importance of the six variables used in the main modeling in Chapter 2 lies in what they have to say about the possible reasons why life evaluations vary over time and especially among countries. The six variables include two, GDP per capita and healthy life expectancy, that have long been used as development indicators and another four covering different aspects of the quality of the social context and institutions in each country, as assessed by the respondents themselves. The four social context variables are: having someone to count on, having a sense of freedom to make key life decisions, generosity, and perceived levels of corruption in business and government. Together these social variables explain more than half of the difference between life evaluations in the average country and those in a hypothetical country (Dystopia) having the world's lowest values of each of the six variables. These results change only slightly if the values of the social variables come not from the same respondents as the life evaluations but from others living in the same country. (Both results are from pp.18–19 and Statistical Appendix 1 of WHR 2018.)

Chapter 2 also covers a range of topics that change from year to year, often being linked to the subjects of other chapters in the same report. For example, in 2018 the main theme was the happiness of migrants, a central feature of five of the seven chapters. Other themes covered in different years have included the social foundations of happiness (2017 and 2020), the geography of happiness (2015), the distribution of happiness (2016), happiness trends (2019) and the roles of several types of trust and benevolence in sustaining life evaluations during times of crisis, as revealed by the accumulating evidence from three COVID-focused reports (2021, 2022, and 2023).

Other chapters, some by editors and others by invited experts, have included happiness in particular countries and regions (China in 2017 and 2018, Africa in 2017, Latin America in 2018, the United States in 2017, 2018, and 2019, East Asia in 2020 and 2021, and the Nordic countries in 2020), wellbeing by age and gender (2015), workplace wellbeing (2017 and 2021), mental health (2013, 2015, 2019, and 2021), using social media to measure wellbeing (2019, 2022, and 2023), the environment (2020), genetics (2022), neuroscience (2015), ethics (2013, 2015, 2016, 2023), the determinants of happiness and misery (2012, 2017), pro-social behaviour (2019, 2023), maintaining social connections during COVID-19 (2021), the use of life evaluations in benefit/cost analysis (2013, 2015), voting (2019), the effects of digital media on happiness (2019) and state effectiveness (2023). All chapters are intended to reflect the latest scientific advances, with technical aspects put into end-notes and online appendices to improve readability for a wide public and policy readership.

Impact

Chapter 3 of the *World Happiness Report 2022* was an invited contribution surveying trends in wellbeing interest and research (Barrington-Leigh 2022). At a broader level, the appearance of the word 'happiness' in books doubled between 1995 and 2020, eclipsing the number of references to either GDP or GNP by 2015. Since 2010 references to happiness have continued to rise, while the previously flat trend for GDP and GNP has become a decline (Figure 2.3 of Barrington-Leigh 2022). References to 'income' were twice as frequent as for 'happiness' in 1995, but have been on a steady downward trend since, and are now only half as frequent as 'happiness'. On a much smaller scale, and starting later, references to 'Beyond GDP' were starting to appear significantly after 2005 and to rise sharply after 2011. References to the 'World Happiness Report' started to appear soon after the appearance of the first report in 2012 and have ever since been growing faster than references to 'beyond GDP', becoming by 2020 almost twice as frequent as references to 'beyond GDP'. The International Society for Quality of Life Studies (ISQOLS) has awarded its 'Betterment of the Human Condition' award to the *World Happiness Report* in 2014 and to the Gallup Organization in 2017 in appreciation of the Gallup World Poll.

Thus the reports are achieving one of their objectives, which has been to broaden public interest in how people in different countries value their lives. Judging from the content of much of the news coverage and commentary, the annual country rankings have been the primary focus of interest. From the perspective of the editors, the rankings are seen as a means of getting readers drawn to the report,

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with their interest then moving beyond how their own country ranks on the scale to what underlies life satisfaction and what might be done to improve it everywhere.

Has this second objective been achieved? Perhaps the best evidence that some progress of this sort has been made is that the Nordic countries, all of which place high in the WHR happiness rankings, have become a focus for global interest during recent years. This had led to the establishment of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, and a variety of other Nordic responses to the growing international interest. Finland, being now in first place for several years, has become even more the center of attention. The evident disbelief of many Finns (https://www.businessinsider.com/finland-happiest-country-in-world-happiness-report-rankings-rolls-eyes-2023-6), and of observers elsewhere, that they could be named the happiest country, has in turn led people to realize that the happiness rankings are based not on happiness as an emotion but on how happy they are about their lives as a whole. And then attention turns to all those aspects of life that are captured by different aspects of the social context, including especially the trust and respect that people there have for each other, and for their institutions, including their governments.

A third objective has been to get life evaluations more widely and effectively used as an umbrella measure of wellbeing and as a guide to policy choice. Here there is much less evidence of progress. Although there has been a welcome increase in the attention that national governments and international agencies place on wellbeing as a policy objective, subjective wellbeing is often still not given a central position, either as a way of measuring welfare or as a guide to policy choices. Most of those charged with developing policy frameworks have professional training and backgrounds that do not include exposure to wellbeingscience, so it is perhaps understandable that their mission statements do not yet give a central role to subjective wellbeing. The World Happiness Reports have aimed to leverage the information provided by the Gallup World Poll and the fast-growing science of wellbeing to change the environment in which policies are considered and decisions made. There is still much to accomplish.

Future

The *World Happiness Reports* have done a lot to broaden interest and knowledge about the measurement and understanding of subjective wellbeing. As already noted above, there is much still left to be done to move more persuasively ‘Beyond GDP’. In our view, this requires the adoption of an overarching measure of wellbeing that gives due weight to GDP, health, institutions, and the social context. Among all social indicators, extended measures of GDP, and aspects of subjective wellbeing, life evaluations are the only ones broad enough to encompass all aspects of life. Equally important, they are primary data based on representative samples of individuals, enabling them to be used to estimate the relative importance of supporting variables such as incomes, health, emotions, and a sense of life purpose. Together, these characteristics provide the essentials for policy choices aimed at improving human welfare: a single umbrella measure plus the means for establishing trade-offs. Evidence supporting these conclusions has been a central part of every past *World Happiness Report*. The quality of the available data and research is continually growing, as it must do to support better decisions. Within countries, this will require much collection of life evaluations within a much broader range of regular surveys and policy evaluations. Although more countries now have some access to nationally collected life evaluations, the range of countries and surveys involved remains small, and even among international agencies tasked with advising how to move beyond GDP, there is still some preference for dashboards of wellbeing indicators (Exton et al. 2023) and focusing on adding new elements to the GDP accounts supplemented by other measures (United Nations 2022) rather than giving a primary role to an umbrella measure that encompasses GDP and other key supports for sustainable wellbeing.

Future editions of the *World Happiness Report* will try to move the dial faster and further by increasing the availability and understanding of life evaluations around the world, as measured for almost all countries in the Gallup World Poll, and also drawing on an ever-deeper pool of national and international data and experiences to build a better evidential base for policy decisions. In this, we will continue to rely heavily on chapters

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contributed by the increasing pool of first-tier experts able and willing to use the *World Happiness Report* to explain and spread their latest research results.

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Notes

1. Resolution 65/309.
2. We are grateful for helpful comments from Chris Barrington-Leigh, Leonard Goff, and Max Norton.

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