

A Cross-cultural Analysis of the Structure
of Subjective Well-Being

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In order for investigations of subjective well-being to have high and lasting utility, we believe they need to be primarily conceived of as studies of individuals' behaviors, rather than of larger collections of individuals, or of various stratum of a society. Below, we shall introduce a definition of subjective well-being, report on results obtained from studies conducted in the US which support our contention, briefly examine one approach to the structural specification of subjective well-being, and close by indicating how this specification has implications for cross-cultural research on the construct.

Definition of Subjective Well-Being

In an exhaustive, scholarly work on conditions of happiness (Veenhoven, 1984), Veenhoven defined happiness as,

"The degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favorably" (p. 22).

[[He defines key concepts contained in the definition, including degree (no optimum), individual, judges (assessments, ordering of values, and priorities; not mentioned the idea of comparison), overall (global rather than domain specific), life-as-a-whole (introduces cross temporal assessments), and favorably (positive to negative).]]

My colleagues and I have also extensively examined research on happiness, life satisfaction, and morale [primarily among elderly citizens of the US]. In the course of this work, we developed a definition of subjective well-being with a different perspective (Stock, Okun, & Benin, 1986), namely:

"Subjective well-being is an abstract, superordinate, construct entailing the affective reactions of individuals along a positive-negative continuum to their life experiences."

[[This definition was elaborated in a number of ways. (1) Subjective well-being is an umbrella concept covering happiness,

life satisfaction, and morale. (2) Persons perceptions of life circumstances are more important than objective conditions, (3) A full range of affective response are involved. (4) A focus on the affective reactions of individuals places this construct within the domain of theories of emotion.]]

Although our definition considers happiness a specific aspect of subjective well-being, both definitions focus on individuals reactions to their life experiences, which implies both are basically concerned with psychological mechanisms underlying individual responses to experiences across the life span. Where Veenhoven focused on judgments about quality of life, we identify affective reactions as more central. However, even this difference is more apparent than real. In clarifying the meanings of the terms degree and favorably, he specifically identified affective constructs, and in our own extended discussion of affective reactions we specifically discussed cognitive components, particularly those of social comparison. The point is that both definitions place the focus of understanding subjective well-being within the individual.

Empirical Results: The Case for a Psychological Perspective

One can examine the structure of subjective well-being in a number of ways. One way is to examine relations among different scales of the construct. Another way is to examine the relation of subjective well-being with measures of traits theoretically relevant to well-being. A third way is to examine the latent structure of measures of subjective well-being—to empirically validate the presence of theoretically relevant substrates. Here, I will present data associated with both ways.

Relations among measures of subjective well-being. Across investigators and studies, a variety of terms have been used for subjective well-being, in Figure 1, I have presented a summary of 77 validity coefficients from 32 different sources [Okun & Stock, 1987; studies based on US elderly].

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 indicates a number of points. First, correlations between measures of happiness and life satisfaction do not differ greatly from those just among different measures of happiness. Second, measures of life satisfaction and morale correlate nearly as highly with each other as they do among themselves. Only correlations between measures of happiness and morale are substantially lower than those among happiness scales or among morale scales.

To these data, I add the preliminary results from a survey of Catalonian elders, who were interviewed using cross-translated versions (into Spanish and Catalan) of the Affect Balance Scale [happiness], the Life Satisfaction Index [life satisfaction], and the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale [morale]. We found that the happiness and life satisfaction measures correlated .30, happiness and morale correlated .56, and life satisfaction and morale correlated .30. The correlation involving happiness and morale is higher than those generally reported in the US, while the remaining two correlations are lower than those reported in the US. Because this study is still in progress, these results may change.

Overall, these data gives an appearance of considerable overlap among measures that have been labeled differently. The data provide little support for currently viewing these various measures as distinct from one another.

Relations between measures of subjective well-being and measures of other constructs. A relatively strong case can be made for our position by examining the relation of subjective well-being with constructs that are basically psychological in nature. Just below, we attempt to make this case. Following that, we briefly report data that indicates that even certain objective conditions of life, like health and income, are better predictors of subjective well-being if they are considered in the context of an individual's perspective.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

In Figure 2, we have displayed correlations of subjective well-being measures with those of psychological adjustment (on the left) and maladjustment (on the right). These are in stem-and-leaf format. Here, the mean correlations have the same magnitude, but opposite signs, a theoretically consistent result. In Figure 3, we report correlations between measures of subjective well-being and measures of satisfaction with family (on the left) and work (on the right). Here the mean correlations are comparable in magnitude and sign. We note in particular that the magnitudes of these different classes of correlations are only somewhat smaller than those existing among measures of subjective well-being themselves.

Two other sets of empirical data convince us that within individual factors are considerably more important than external factors. These data relate to correlations between measures of subjective well-being and indices of health, and of income. In our own work, we separated correlations between subjective well-being and health into two categories, those where there was an objective index of health (such as a health professional's assessment) versus those that merely involved a person's subjective assessment (usually based on a single 5-point likert item). Among the former the mean correlation was just .15, while among the latter the

correlation was .35 (Okun, Stock, Haring, & Witter, 1984). Lawton (1983) has reported similar findings with respect to objective income versus self-perceived judgments of income adequacy.

Internal structure of subjective well-being. Examining the internal structure of measures of subjective well-being provides a second way of understanding what components are involved in expressions of well-being. In the US, studies like this are quite common [Andrews & McKennell, 1980; Liang, 1984, 1985; McKennell & Andrews, 1980; Michalos, 1980; provide examples of different perspectives on this approach]. Our own work has domain extended the work of Andrews and McKennell, and is firmly rooted in modern psychological (and one sociological) theories of emotion (e.g., Tomkins, 1970; Kemper, 1980). In these theories, emotional behaviors are dependent upon both affective and cognitive processes. Consequently, using a structural equation analysis of a national probability sample, we investigated how well a factor structure involving two affective dimensions (positive and negative) and one cognitive factor fit a number of subjective well-being scales. Our work extended that of Andrews and McKennell by specifically and operationally defining cognitive in terms of social or temporal comparisons. Our solutions were as good as those previously reported, and had the advantage of being based on a clear theoretical foundation.

We proceeded from these results to recommendations regarding a general and replicable procedure for constructing indices of subjective well-being. This procedure included the following steps.

First, scale items need to contain descriptors that are either unambiguously positive or negative in their affective content. This criterion insures that each item contributes variance along either the positive or affective dimension. Following, Diener (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), it is also important that modifiers of these affective descriptors be included which tap into frequency and intensity aspects of affect.

Second, in order items need to contain operationally specifiable content that taps cognitive or judgmental aspects of assessment. In Stock, Okun, and Benin (1986), while fitting a structural model to the Affect Balance Scale and the Life Satisfaction Index A. we were able to successfully specify and identify in the pool of items two types of cognitive processes. The first was intrapersonal comparisons over time, and the second was interpersonal comparisons at some fixed point in time. These are not the only possible ways to specify and operationalize cognitive processes. For example, we note here the many successful investigations of subjective well-being conducted by Alex Michalos using the gap model.

We believe these prescriptions have important implications for the conduct of cross-cultural investigations of subjective well-being. First, the identification and sampling of domains of affective descriptors, and of modifiers involving frequency and intensity, are simpler procedures to undertake. The same is true for different classes of specific and definable comparisons. Once identified, these descriptors can be studied in their own right across different cultures. A subsequent step would involve the evaluation of fully constructed scales based on these domains of descriptors and comparisons. Thereafter, the search for causal antecedents could begin in earnest.

Our own work in Catalonia is just a first step in this direction, in that all of the major social gerontological scales of subjective well-being have been cross- and back-translated into both Spanish and Catalan. We have already demonstrated that at least some of the items across all these scales are specifiable in the terms outlined above. Thus, as a first step will involve verification of the structural models already reported by us. Subsequent studies will move on to the steps outlined above.

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Figure 1. Means and standard deviations of validity coefficients of subjective well-being (Okun & Stock, 1987)

	Happiness	Life Satisfaction	Morale
Happiness	M = .45 SD = .18 N = 11		
Life Satisfaction	M = .49 SD = .18 N = 16	M = .68 SD = .21 N = 18	
Morale	M = .35 SD = .12 N = 4	M = .55 SD = .17 N = 25	M = .61 SD = .10 N = 3

Figure 2. Stem-and -leaf diagrams for adjustment SWB (on left) and neuroticism/SWB (on right). Read a stem and one leaf value to obtain one estimate of correlation.

Adjustment/SWB (25 est., 15 studies) Neuroticism/SWB (31 est., 13 studies)

Stem	Leaves	Stem	Leaves
8	1	1	
7		0	5
7	4	0	
6	6	-0	
6		-0	
5		-1	
5	0	-1	9
4	5	-2	443
4	234	-2	
3	578	-3	30
3	044	-3	88
2	5667	-4	44311
2		-4	9998
1	59	-5	3220
1	24	-5	88776
0	6	-6	2
0	4	-6	6
.		-7	4
.		-7	5
.			
-	.12		

Figure 3. Stem-and-leaf diagram for SWB and satisfaction with family (left) and work (right). Read one stem and one leaf to obtain a single estimate of correlation.

Family			Work	
Leaves	Stem		Leaves	
	7		3	
77	6		78	
40	6		23	
86	5		68	
443200	5		11234	
887766	4		566677999	
110	4		0012222233444	
8776655	3		5567799	
4222110	3		0000000111122334	
98888666655	2		55677889999	
33322222211	2		001112334	
99987755	1		55566666777789	
4332110	1		0123444	
9987	0		5	
31	0		144	
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- .08, -.21			-.11	