

Preface

The interest around subjective well-being studies in the academic, institutional, and public spheres has risen in the last decades. This trend reflects growing aspirations within the general public for which desires exceed mere material consumption. Scholars of various disciplines have worked since the 1960s on developing tools and studies in order to better grasp the conditions in which people thrive. In spite of these recent evolutions, economic indicators are still largely dominant except for a few local exceptions such as Bhutan or the recent indicators developed by the OECD.

In order to further push subjective well-being (SWB) as a credible political agenda, academics must be able to reflect and communicate on their scientific contribution on this subject. This means that they should know where the scientific exercise resides and where it does not, what is known for certain as well as the current limits and needs for improvements. This requires looking at the necessary strengthening needed in the web of knowledge of studies on subjective well-being.

That is what the present book is about. It aims at addressing existing weaknesses within the field of SWB studies in order to reinforce the scientific and political legitimacy of SWB. It is a reflexive exercise needed in any serious and honest scientific approach. In planning this book, we established three objectives:

First, in spite of recent progresses made in the field, we believe the conceptual framework should still be questioned. The fact that researchers overly use the metrics of SWB should not prevent any debate around measuring the subjective part of well-being from taking place. This should stay an open process with retro loops questioning the existing framework.

Second, although scholars now understand quite well how to measure various dimensions of subjective well-being, we believe it is important to keep looking in the areas of opacity in order to keep improving the understanding of the conditions of use and non-use of the existing metrics.

Third, the largely used comparative framework should also question the conditions of comparability and non-comparability of the different measures. Thus, it is important to keep looking for tools that enable us to better depict the *subjective reality* of actors.

What we cover in this book is necessarily selective and incomplete. It is not aimed at covering these issues, rather showing exiting progress and encouraging further efforts in these directions.

This book is an invitation to reflect on various issues related to the metrics used to measure the subjective component of quality of life. These issues are of conceptual, measurement, and comparability matter. Each of them is tackled in a dedicated part.

The first part aims at tackling conceptual issues. Frank Martela offers a reflection on the measurement of good life ([“Can Good Life be Measured? The Dimensions and Measurability of a Life Worth Living”](#)). Looking at good life through the spectrum of four dimensions (well-being, morality, meaning, and authenticity), this chapter is looking into the measurement of what are considered as the components of good life. This should enable to create what the author considers as a “more balanced view of good life.” According to the author, these four dimensions are not exhaustive, rather a minimum set of dimensions that should enable to measure good life. Next, Mariano Rojas ([“The Subjective Object of Well-Being Studies. Well-being as the Experience of Being Well”](#)) states the inherent subjectivity of the feeling of being well. Therefore, the author simply rejects the notion of objective well-being. Not only is the object measured essentially subjective, the process of constructing metrics itself takes place within the subjective world of the researcher.

The second part looks into measurement issues. In Chapter [“Measures of Happiness: Which to Choose?”](#), Ruut Veenhoven gives an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the various measures of happiness. After exploring the various pitfalls of the measurements of various dimensions, advice is provided for choosing a measure based on conceptual, methodological, and pragmatic considerations. In the next chapter ([“Explaining the Decline in Subjective Well-Being Over Time in Panel Data”](#)), Katia Iglesias, Pascale Gazareth, and Christian Suter explore the apparent decline in subjective well-being in Switzerland in the last 15 years. The authors show that once taking into account four different explanations (non-random attrition, panel conditioning, sample refreshment, and aging of participants), there is no actual decline once controlling for these methodological issues. The effects of each issue are hard or sometimes impossible to disentangle. In the next chapter ([“Reducing Current Limitations in Order to Enhance the Quality of Subjective Well-Being Research: The Example of Mindfulness”](#)), Rebecca Shankland, Ilios Kotsou, Caroline Cuny, Lionel Strub, and Nicholas Brown look into various methodological considerations around mindfulness scales. The authors show the conceptual issues around the definition of mindfulness and its operationalization, as well as possible methodological flaws in selecting the candidates that might show an optimism bias. In the following chapter ([“Measuring Indecision in Happiness Studies”](#)), Stefania Capecchi looks into the presence of a permanent indecision factor when respondents express their level of subjective well-being. A flexible class of model named CUB (Combination of discrete uniform and shifted binomial distributions) is used to investigate response artefacts and highlight a refuge option. The model also enables to isolate this effect which deserves specific consideration.

The third part of this book looks into the issues related to comparability. Inga Kristoffersen looks into the differences across individuals in assessing their well-being (“The theoretical case for cardinal and ordinal interpersonal and intrapersonal comparison of life satisfaction scores”). More specifically, the author examines cardinal and ordinal compatibility among individuals and pledges for an improvement of these two types of comparability. The chapter offers possible approaches for reducing arbitrariness and evaluating distinctness, order and (potentially) equidistance of the measurement scale for subjective wellbeing. Ester Macri thereafter compares label scales and rating scales in the Italian context (“[Label Scale and Rating Scale in Subjective Well-Being Measurement](#)”). The author reviews the labelling of scales and shows some differences in between the way people label the different stages of the ladder of life satisfaction. A matching model between label scales and rating scales is shown, and propositions for comparing these scales are given.

Finally, some indications are given as to improve measurability or comparability of data. Dong-Jin Lee, Grace Yu, and Joseph Sirgy show the implications of the cultural dimension on the responses of life satisfaction questions (“[Culture and Well-Being: A Research Agenda Designed to Improve Cross-Cultural Research Involving the Life Satisfaction Construct](#)”). In particular, looking at major cultural dimensions developed in the literature (individualism, authority, competition, risk, time span and status), the authors offer some theoretical considerations and propositions to offer methodological remedies. Next, Kenneth Land, Vicki Lamb, and Emma Zang show, using the US Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI) through the spectrum of the Easterlin paradox, that using composite indicator provides a stronger long-term association (“[Objective and Subjective Indices of Well-Being: Resolving the Easterlin Happiness–Income Paradox](#)”). Through this example, the authors bring some brinks of understanding in explaining some of the so-called Easterlin paradox. Finally, Tineke de Jonge focuses on the Scale Interval Method (SIM) and the Reference Distribution Model (RDM) to increase cross-national comparability in surveys (“[Methods to Increase the Comparability in Cross-National Surveys, Highlight on the Scale Interval Method and the Reference Distribution Method](#)”). The first method brings some improvement in understanding the context (culture, language) in which the scale is used, where the second is aimed at increasing the comparability of several questions on the same topic.

These chapters can be read independently but form a consistent whole and contribute all in different ways in understanding better the porosity between objective and subjective when working with subjective well-being.

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