



A Pioneer in Broadening the Use of Subjective Well-Being to Measure and Improve Quality of Life, and in Establishing the Social Sources of Well-Being

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After undergraduate degrees at UBC (in Commerce) and Oxford (in philosophy, politics and economics, as a Rhodes Scholar), and a D.Phil in economics from Oxford, I then combined university research and teaching (mainly at UBC, preceded by three years in Oxford and interrupted by four at Harvard as Mackenzie King Visiting Professor of Canadian Studies) with public policy research. The latter included positions at the Bank of Canada, several Canadian Royal Commissions, the OECD, central banks in Australia and New Zealand, and other research institutes in the UK, the US, and Sweden, mainly using quantitative modelling to combine theory and data to better understand a variety of issues important for the quality of life. The topics included employment, inflation and growth, international trade, capital movements and migration, energy and natural resources, comparative development, and, starting in the 1990s, social capital.

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My research into subjective well-being, and especially its social context, started in the early 1990s, when I was at Harvard as political scientist Robert Putnam was bringing social capital into the academic, public and political discourses. Our initial joint work used social capital to help explain differences in the levels and growth of income among the regions of Italy. But to properly establish the value of social capital requires a broader and more encompassing measure of human welfare. Putnam had already found that people were more satisfied with their lives as a whole in US states with higher levels of trust and civic engagement. This raised for us the possibility for using subjective well-being to assess the relative importance of a broad range of factors affecting lives, from incomes and employment through health and the social context to the quality of government and the workplace. Several aspects of the social context (Helliwell & Putnam 2004), including friends, family and community ties, and several dimensions of trust and generosity, were found to be of primary importance to life evaluations, extending far beyond their previously established roles in supporting incomes, employment, and health.

These lines of research drew me into productive collaborations with leading psychologists and other scholars who were developing positive psychology and the broader science of well-being. The results included collaborative work on the policy relevance of subjective well-being research (Diener et al. 2009), and the application of the science of well-being in an international context (Diener et al., 2010). These collaborations were importantly fostered through the interdisciplinary research program on Social Interactions, Identity and Well-Being of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. This program, directed by George Akerlof and me, was in operation from 2005 to 2017. The program used regular meetings of researchers from several countries, drawn from economics, psychology, sociology, and political science, to enable specialists to achieve fast learning curves in each other's disciplines, and to start to develop a supra-disciplinary social science of well-being.

Partly through these collaborations, I was involved with the early development of the Gallup World Poll, with OECD's development of international guidelines for national collection of subjective well-being data, and with the Bhutan-sponsored Gross National Happiness conferences. Hence I was part of the group invited to a conference in Thimphu in July, 2011, chaired by Jeffrey Sachs and Prime Minister Thinley of Bhutan, to help develop the agenda and supporting materials for a 2012 High Level meeting at the United Nations. The April 2012 meeting was intended to help implement the June 2011 UN General Assembly resolution to make happiness and well-being more central to national and global attempts to develop a framework for sustainable human development.

The first World Happiness Report, which I edited with Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs (the whole WHR series may be found at: <http://worldhappiness.report>) was prepared for the April 2012 meeting to provide a benchmark summary of data and analysis available to support public policies. The Report was well enough received that it has been repeated, now on an annual basis. The World Happiness Reports help record and broaden the public availability of subjective well-being data and research. They are most importantly based on people's evaluations of the quality of their own lives, as surveyed by the Gallup World Poll, which now collects data annually from 1000 respondents in each of more than 150 countries.

The World Happiness Reports have helped to spawn national institutes focused on happiness (e.g. the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen), and have monitored and encouraged the increasing collection and use of happiness data by national governments, sub-national groups and communities, and international agencies and organizations. The World Happiness Report was selected to receive the ISQOLS Betterment of the Human Condition award in 2014.

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