

Introduction

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Introduction

From having been treated with considerable scepticism by politicians and scholars alike during much of the post-war era, happiness has recently won renewed actuality in public debate, both as a target of scientific enquiry as well as an explicit concept in public policy evaluations.¹ While individual well-being has long been closely connected with prosperity, high material standards of life, and good physical health – in short, welfare – recent interest has increasingly turned towards the role of various non-economical factors in promoting healthy living, psychological well-being, quality of life, and subjective happiness on the societal level.

This renewed attention has, among other things, manifested itself in a recent surge of international rankings which aim to measure the level of quality of life, satisfaction with life, and subjective well-being (SWB) – as distinct from objective well-being (OWB) – within and across different societies.² Recently, ‘satisfaction with life’ has been added to traditional measures, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to which different societies are being compared and evaluated. Other examples include the Human Development Index (HDI), the Satisfaction with Life Index (SLI), the Gallup World Poll (GWP), the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Survey (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS).

1 This scepticism has been the norm in Western Europe and North America, while explicit notions of happiness have continued to play a decidedly political function in East Asian as well as South East Asian politics.

2 Costanza, Robert et al. (2007) ‘Quality of Life: An Approach Integrating Opportunities, Human Needs, and Subjective Well-Being’. *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 61, Issues 2–3, 267–276.

The enthusiastic media reception of these new rankings and their eager appropriation by governments as well as intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations around the world warrants the growing interest and global importance of non-economic and immaterial factors for human well-being, in advanced welfare states as well as in developing countries.

Partly, this renewed attention follows from advances in scientific research, not only in psychology and psychiatry, where the commonsensical inverse of happiness, depression, has long been the object of concern, but also in the natural sciences and the social sciences more broadly. Partly, it has been promoted by a long-standing commercial interest in 'life coaching', 'self-help', and psychotherapy. In both these aspects, it primarily addresses the preconditions for individual happiness and well-being.

Certainly, images and notions of individual happiness have long been employed for advertising purposes, at least since the emergence of mass consumption from the late nineteenth century and onwards. The fulfilment of desires, needs, and wants through the consumption of various products and services have fused into a cultural mix of social norms, signifiers, and symbols of pleasure, satisfaction, and personal success that the individual may subscribe to or resist at different points in life.³

Recent research appears to confirm the importance of consumption and 'shopping' for satisfaction with life.⁴ Yet, this commercial appropriation of happiness has been criticized for reproducing 'false needs' by generating a kind of 'treadmill syndrome', whereby consumers are conditioned to crave for the next experience, product, or service but rarely achieving the desired satisfaction. This may generate economic growth, critics assert, but does not necessarily lead to societal progress, personal development, or, for that matter, individual happiness.⁵

3 Kellner, Douglas (1983) 'Critical Theory, Commodities, and the Consumer Society'. *Theory, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 66–84.

4 Roos, John Magnus (ed.) (2012) *Konsumtionsrapporten 2012*. Göteborg: Centrum för konsumtionsvetenskap, Handelshögskolan vid Göteborgs universitet.

5 Slater, Don (1997) 'Consumer Culture and the Politics of Need'. In Nava, Mica, Blake, Andrew, MacRury, Iain & Richards, Barry (eds) *Buy This Book: Contemporary Issues in Advertising and Consumption*. London: Routledge; Bruni, Luigino & Porta, Pier Luigi (eds) (2007) *Handbook on the Economics of Happiness* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; Dahlén, Micael (2008) *Nextopia – Livet, lyckan och pengarna i förväntningssamhället*. Stockholm: Volante förlag.

In the early 1970s, Richard Easterlin, American economist and happiness research pioneer, pinpointed the subjective and relative character of the income–happiness nexus, claiming that:

“[i]n all societies, more money for the individual typically means more individual happiness. However, raising the incomes of all does not increase the happiness of all. [...] The resolution of this paradox lies in the relative nature of welfare judgments. Individuals assess their material well-being, not in terms of the absolute amount of goods they have, but relative to a social norm of what goods they ought to have.”⁶

The attention upon individual happiness as distinct from societal happiness has also been criticized for supporting a materialistic and market-oriented approach towards life, which may primarily serve commercial interests and hence support ‘neoliberal’ biopolitics.⁷ More recent critics have also claimed that the commercialization of the moral imperative for the individual to achieve happiness, however defined, underpins the existing socio-economic order, channelling the proverbial ‘pursuit of happiness’ into competition between atomized individuals, rather than promoting collective effort towards solving common problems and pursuing common values in society at large.⁸

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- 6 Easterlin, Richard (1973) ‘Does Money Buy Happiness?’ *The Public Interest*, Vol. 30, 4; see also Easterlin, Richard (1974) ‘Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?’ In David, Paul A. & Reder, Melvin Warren (eds) *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*. New York: Academic Press, 89–125.
- 7 Lasch, Christopher (1978) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton; Rimke, Heidi Marie (2000) ‘Governing Citizens Through Self-Help Literature’. *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 61–78; Moskowitz, Eva S. (2001) *In Therapy We Trust: America’s Obsessions with Self-Fulfillment*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Hazelden, Rebecca (2003) ‘Love Yourself: The Relationship of the Self with Itself in Popular Self-Help Texts’. *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 413–428; McGee, Micki (2005) *Self-Help, Inc. Makeover Culture in American Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Rose, Nikolas (1989) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Routledge; Rose, Nikolas (1996) *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Foucault, Michel (2004) *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 8 Ahmed, Sara (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press; Ehrenreich, Barbara (2009) *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company.

According to this critique, the booming market for self-help literature, life coaching, and the subsequent commodification of psychology and psychotherapy reinforces the image of self-governing and self-regulating 'rational economic man' as the ideal human being. This personality type supposedly copes individually with adverse circumstances either through adaptation, competition, or therapy, rather than through voicing protest or political engagement. Thereby, critics assert, the ideal type of rational economic man may serve to marginalize or even replace the ideal of the socially embedded and politically active citizen. The rise of 'the happiness agenda' or 'the happiness industry' has thus been interpreted as a commercial-cultural symptom of the neoliberal economic order.⁹

But the renewed interest in happiness has also followed from a possibly more 'progressive' (as distinct from neoliberal) interest in alternative ways of assessing policy outcomes as well as providing a more fair ground for the comparison of different societies than the straitjacket of GDP and the mono-dimensional focus upon economic growth as the primary goal.¹⁰ Here, the concern with SWB is rather connected with socio-economic equality, life chances, social integration, and ecological and social sustainability.¹¹

The emerging field of happiness economics has served as a channel of communication between the distinct academic fields of social statistics and happiness research as it seeks to quantify and measure subjective well-being while analyzing its relationship to measures of competitiveness, growth, and prosperity.¹² This concern has become more acute in the wake of the recent recession, as financially strapped governments point to 'austerity policies'

9 Ahmed 2010; Burnett, Simon (2011) *The Happiness Agenda: A Modern Obsession*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

10 Gandelman, Néstor & Hernández-Murillo, Rubén (2009) 'The Impact of Inflation and Unemployment on Subjective Personal and Country Evaluations'. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, Vol. 91, No. 3, 107–126.

11 Sen, Amartya (1993) 'Capability and Well-being'. In Nussbaum, Martha & Sen, Amartya (eds) *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 30–53; Dahrendorf, Ralf (1979) *Life Chances: Approaches to Social and Political Theory*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

12 Ahmed 2010; Abdallah, Saamah, Thompson, Sam & Marks, Nic (2008) 'Estimating Worldwide Life Satisfaction'. *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 65, No. 1, 35–47; Oswald, Andrew (1999) 'A Non-Technical Introduction to the Economics of Happiness'. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/oswald/intro.pdf>> (accessed October 2012); Powdthavee, Nattavudh (2007) 'Economics of Happiness: A Review of Literature and Applications'. *Chulalongkorn Journal of Economics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 51–73.

and 'sufficiency economy' as a way of coping with weaker economic growth, rather than questioning the focus upon economic growth.

As of yet, the findings of happiness economics remain inconclusive. Some studies suggest real GDP at purchase power parity (PPP) per capita affect happiness positively.¹³ Other studies show little or no correlation between absolute and relative income levels and SWB, positing the existence of a 'satiation point' in the range between USD 15 000–20 000 GDP (PPP), beyond which wealthier countries register no further increase in SWB.¹⁴ Recently, for example, Angus Deaton has used Gallup polls to show that the current financial crisis has had little verifiable impact upon the SWB of Americans, despite widespread public perceptions to the contrary.¹⁵ In a related vein, it has been suggested that SWB is rather determined by personality traits than by external circumstances. According to some observers, this would seem to indicate that there is an individual 'happiness set point' to which people tend to return to after both positive and negative experiences.¹⁶

These divergent results of happiness research render eventual policy implications of this emerging discipline difficult to assess. Some members of the research community have been reluctant to make policy recommendations before the complex links between income, wealth, leisure, freedom of choice, and welfare policies and their impact upon SWB have been more fully explored. American lawyer Derek Bok has recently questioned whether the research results could warrant a new politics of happiness, claiming

13 Discussing the link between income and well-being, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers argue that 'several interesting variants of the question could be asked—such as whether it is GDP, broader measures of economic development, or alternatively, changes in output or in productivity that drive happiness', but note that '[u]nfortunately, we lack the statistical power to resolve these questions'. Hence, they concentrate their study on the GDP–SWB relationship. See Stevenson, Betsey & Wolfers, Justin (2008) 'Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox'. NBER Working Paper No. 14282. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14282.pdf?new_window=1> (accessed October 2012)

14 For recent discussions, see Layard, Richard (2005) *Happiness: Lessons From A New Science*. London: Penguin; Layard, Richard (2012) 'Mental Health: The New Frontier for the Welfare State'. Online. Available HTTP: <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/textonly/_new/staff/layard/pdf/LAYARD6-March-lecture.pdf> (accessed October 2012)

Layard, Richard, Mayraz, Guy & Nickell, Stephen John (2008) 'The Marginal Utility of Income'. *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 92, Issues 8–9, 1846–1857; Stevenson & Wolfers 2008.

15 Deaton, Angus (2011) 'The Financial Crisis and the Well-being of Americans'. *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 1–26.

16 Bruni & Porta 2007.

that the welfare state shows a low impact upon SWB.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Bok supports an expansion of welfare state commitments in the USA with a view of improving quality of life and SWB. Other researchers have more explicitly supported the government policy of maximizing SWB with regard to specific policy areas, such as employment policies and psychological therapy, as well as public policy more generally. In a typical statement, one of the most vocal proponents for a new politics of happiness, British economist Richard Layard, has argued that a government's role should be to increase happiness and reduce misery and that 'well-being and mental health need to be the new frontier for the welfare state'.¹⁸ Given the inconclusiveness of the research, however, it remains uncertain exactly what kind of policies would constitute such a 'new frontier'.

Happiness, well-being, and the (Nordic) welfare state

So far, the Nordic countries have scored well in comparative statistics on SWB. The Danes, for example, were ranked first on happiness according to the Gallup World Poll 2005–2011, followed by the Finns, the Norwegians, and the Dutch.¹⁹ Similarly, in the OECD's Better Life Index of 2012 Norway, Sweden, and Denmark came out among the top five.²⁰

While the rankings in themselves do not explain the underlying causes, the Nordic model of welfare, with its focus upon collective and universal social security, has typically been seen as a key factor for these favourable results. This notion has a tradition, too, as the Nordic countries have for a long time been presented as utopian 'happy democracies' where freedom and welfare have been successfully combined.²¹

17 Bok, Derek (2010) *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

18 Layard 2012.

19 For a discussion of earlier scores, see Greve, Bent (ed.) (2010) *Happiness and Social Policy in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar; Helliwell, John F., Layard, Richard & Sachs, Jeffrey D. (eds) (2012) *World Happiness Report*. New York: The Earth Institute, Columbia University.

20 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) 'Better Life Index'. Online. Available HTTP: <www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org> (accessed October 2012)

21 See for example Tingsten, Herbert (1966) *Från idéer till idyll: Den lyckliga demokratien*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget PAN/Norstedts.

As the global financial crisis has forced national governments to adopt austerity policies and cut public spending, welfare state supporters across the world point to the success of Nordic countries in these rankings, underlining the role of social policies in promoting growth and stability in the midst of recession.²² Admittedly, the Nordic score in terms of SWB may simply reflect performance on a number of traditional parameters – such as GDP per capita, growth, competitiveness, market freedom, productivity, as well as social equality (Gini), healthcare, safety, and public trust – which are usually also taken into account in various rankings of SWB. Yet, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that social policy may have a direct positive influence on SWB, not only through providing for economic growth and creativity, but also through ensuring redistribution, social security, and social equality.²³ In short, the welfare state may be a decisive factor for ‘Nordic happiness’.²⁴

Yet, all is not necessarily well in the Nordic welfare states – at least not for all, and certainly not all of the time. For example, mental disorders are reportedly on the rise in all Nordic societies.²⁵ The increasing prevalence of stress symptoms and mental illness stands in a complex relation to recent shifts in the scope and means of social benefits and social security more generally, in the Nordic countries as well as elsewhere.²⁶ International studies have shown that mental distress has become a more common reason for early retirement since the early 1980s and onwards, especially among young adults.²⁷ At the same time, socio-economic gaps are also reported as widening in the Nordic welfare states.

22 Marklund, Carl (forthcoming 2013) ‘A Swedish Norden or a Nordic Sweden? Image Politics During the Cold War’. In Jonas Harvard & Peter Stadius (eds) *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*. Farnham: Ashgate.

23 Saari, Juho (2012) *Onnellisuuspolitiikka – Kohti sosiaalisesti kestävää Suomea*. Helsinki: Kalevi Sorsa Säätiö; Wilkinson, Richard G. & Pickett, Kate (2009) *The Spirit Level – Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Penguin.

24 Greve 2010; Saari 2012.

25 Olofsson, Jonas & Östh, John (2011) *Förtidspensionering av unga. En fråga om utsortering efter utbildningsnivå och socioekonomisk bakgrund? Underlagsrapport till den parlamentariska socialförsäkringsutredningen*. Stockholm: Parlamentariska socialförsäkringsutredningen.

26 See for example OECD (2011) *Sick on the Job? Myths and Realities about Mental Health and Work*. Paris: OECD Publishing; OECD (2013) *Mental Health and Work: Sweden*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

27 Olofsson & Östh 2011.

Traditionally, universalist welfare policies do not only provide a basic social security for all. They also seek to help people through transitory periods of difficulty in life. But what happens in the trade-off between the needs of those with transitory problems and the needs of those who risk permanent problems?

In response to this query, this book brings together social scientists and historians in a discussion of how these emerging trends interrelate with one another. The volume is based on some of the contributions presented at the conference 'All well in the welfare state? Mental well-being and the politics of happiness' at the Department of Economic and Political Studies at the University of Helsinki in the autumn of 2011, which was a part of the activities of the Nordic Centre of Excellence: The Nordic Welfare State – Historical Foundations and Future Challenges, *NordWel*. The conference was organized by one of its theme groups: 'The Normative Charges of Work: The Labour Market and the Welfare State'.

The contributions focus upon two different aspects of the relationship between SWB on the one hand and welfare on the other hand. If a given society's 'quality' can be assessed by its attitude towards and the assistance it provides its weakest members, it first becomes of interest to ask what the recent attention to SWB may mean for those who are the least likely to possess the economical and social means that are 'normally' expected to enhance either OWB or SWB. It is by no means self-evident who may, at times, belong to this groups. But given the demonstrably unequal access to life chances, likely groups may include the physically ill and the mentally disabled as well as substance abusers. Also children, elderly, immigrants, and the unemployed may face similar challenges. The question is whether the SWB of these groups is strengthened or obscured by the new interest in the happiness of society as a whole, with its concomitant focus upon the needs of the majority, e.g. the gainfully employed and economically more secure members of society.

Second, the contributions also address the relationship between economic and non-economic factors, between OWB and SWB, and between welfare and well-being for perceived life satisfaction. The links between income, wealth, and work on the one hand and social relations, stress, and

safety on the other hand, as well as physical health and mental health, are not only complex in their own right. Post-materialist and progressive discourses on happiness are increasingly merging with neoliberal discourses on liberty and self-actualization, posing new and complex challenges to welfare states, not only in the Nordic countries, but in other welfare states as well.

Overview of the book

As Varda Soskolne shows in her chapter, advances in medicine and social policy have led to major improvements in health and to extended life expectancy globally, affecting SWB positively. But Soskolne asks whether this occurs in all sections of society. In Israel, health inequalities have widened since the 1990s, in parallel with an increase in income inequalities and a shift from welfare state policies to more neoliberal policies, including the privatization of the healthcare sector and the transfer of more health and welfare services to NGOs and private companies. Soskolne shows that socioeconomic status (SES) correlates with rising inequalities in health, probing the extent to which the psychosocial environment may explain these inequalities. Soskolne notes that the interventions and policies aimed at ‘closing the gap’ between different socio-economic groups is not yet fully covered in the scientific literature, confirming the notion that the relationship between happiness research and welfare state policies remains uncertain.

In her chapter, Katarina Piuva shows how ‘normality’ has become an expected precondition for health and happiness in Sweden: While the mentally ill are supposed to be integrated into society at large, they are also to be viewed as if they paradoxically did not have any specific needs. Normality, in its turn, is closely connected with performance in various social activities, including work. As ‘health’ is increasingly defined as ability to work through the concept of ‘employability’, Piuva concludes that implicit understandings of normality may serve as an obstacle to the social integration of the severely mentally ill. In other words, the principles of normality that have become the ideology of social integration may turn out to be a demand on the individual to live a life just like ‘everybody else’ – a demand which may have been the cause of the discomfort to begin with.

The dehospitalization movement exemplifies an attempt to close the gap between the well-being of the mentally ill and the majority population. In their chapter, Anna Alanko and Carl Marklund show how mental health care planning in Finland has adapted to the international trend towards dehospitalization, partly in the interest of increased cost-efficiency, but also with the SWB of the mentally ill in mind. However, as the categories of mental illness continue to expand, so does the demand for inpatient treatment rise in parallel with the demands for more outpatient treatment. Rising mental problems, especially among the young, can be interpreted as a sign of decreasing SWB and higher stress in society, running the risk of putting further strain on the already limited resources available for those in the most need of special care.

While some groups in society may thus require protection from the demands of 'normal' life in order to achieve SWB, other groups may instead increase their well-being as a result of being exposed to precisely these challenges and rewards. In her contribution, Margrét Einarisdóttir looks at the relationship between part-time work and SWB among teenagers in Iceland. In particular, she tracks the sensitive balance between the independence and autonomy that follows from being gainfully employed and the risks and demands being posed by work. Einarisdóttir notes that monetary reasons are not necessarily the determining cause for teenagers' work in Iceland, but that work ethics, independence, autonomy, socialization, and enjoyment play key roles, too. Her findings underline that teenagers, even in a welfare state under considerable economic strain, typically enter the job market primarily to enact a consumer identity, which in its turn affects teenage perceptions of the relationship between work, income, and happiness.

Einarisdóttir's study deals with part-time work, but points to the relationship between permanent (un)employment and SWB. Most studies show that involuntary unemployment is as strongly related to negative SWB as leisure is linked to positive SWB. Nordic welfare states have recently been grappling with the problem of rising unemployment in particular groups whose social inclusion and protection is sometimes seen as an onerous cost, in what amounts to a criticism of the welfare state and its ability to provide

not only jobs but also well-being for all. According to this criticism, governmental policies should singularly focus on creating jobs rather than social protection. In his chapter, Olli Kangas compares the well-being of immigrants in different European countries, noting that immigrants report the highest levels of SWB in the countries which have the most generous welfare policies, thus challenging the arguments of the welfare-state critics.

In their chapter, Pekka Sulkunen and Trygve Ugland address the relationship between substance abuse, abuse control, and SWB by comparing French and Nordic policies against the backdrop of emerging common EU policy goals. While alcohol policy aims to improve not only public health and reduce health care spending, but also to further the well-being of the population in general, there is also a tension between the duty to further the well-being of those who are the least likely to conform to societal norms about happiness without infringing upon the independence and identity of the individual person. If welfare policies then may then have direct implications for individual as well as societal well-being, it also becomes important to consider under what conditions well-being and happiness should or should not be made the target of political agency.

In the closing chapter, Carl Marklund looks at the emerging rankings of different societies with regard to SWB. Noting that the generation of scientific knowledge often constitutes the first step towards the establishment of a new policy field, the chapter discusses how these new rankings may affect welfare-state policy making. However, the inclusion of these categories into global rankings appears to play a soothing rather than spurring function, confirming that the rising interest in happiness has not, at least not just yet, been explicitly politicized.

Yet, given the way in which the discussions on happiness activate critical tensions in contemporary society, of material welfare versus subjective well-being, prosperity versus sustainability, and state responsibility versus individual responsibility, the public discourse on happiness may well develop into a critical site of political contest in the near future. Due to the inconclusive status of happiness research, however, the political consequences of this possible 'new frontier' in welfare state policies can just as well serve

to expand the responsibility of the welfare state as it may further limit the reach of politics, pointing to the responsibility of the individual for his/her own happiness.

Conclusions

The high score of the Nordic welfare states in the rankings of happiness could possibly indicate that the welfare state – originally concerned with the universal provision of basic social benefits while providing additional social support to those most in need – already makes a substantial contribution to SWB. Is all well in the welfare state, then?

The contributions to this book point in two possibly diverging directions when addressing this question. On the one hand, acknowledging the risks posed by mental as well as material sources of stress, a continued commitment to welfare state universalism could take on responsibility for the overall happiness and well-being of the population, representing a kind of ‘politics of happiness’ reaching beyond the concerns of material welfare. SWB could thereby become another public good, alongside the more customary objectives of welfare policy.

On the other hand, several tendencies in contemporary society point towards the greater medicalization of various social conditions, while stress and discomfort are reportedly on the rise due to the high demands of work and pressures in social life, potentially expanding the number of people who report dissatisfaction and low SWB as well as mental ill health. Here, the renewed attention to SWB could possibly signal the advent of a negative ‘politics against unhappiness’ – as distinct from a positive politics of happiness which would be more concerned with the need for individual therapy than the reduction of collective risk.

Either way, the arrival of SWB on the political agenda activates the dual duty of the welfare state to not only answer to the basic social demands of the population at large, even when these expand beyond basic provisions and social services, but to continue to extend assistance and care to those in the most need.

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