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# National Accounts of Subjective Well-Being

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Ed Diener

University of Virginia, University of Utah, and The Gallup Organization

Shigehiro Oishi  
Richard E. Lucas

University of Virginia  
Michigan State University

*Diener (2000) proposed that National Accounts of Well-Being be created to complement existing economic and social indicators that reflect the quality of life in nations. These national accounts can provide valuable information to policymakers and other leaders. Systematic measurement of subjective well-being provides novel information about the quality of life in societies, and it allows for the accumulation of detailed information regarding the circumstances that are associated with high subjective well-being. Thus, accounts of subjective well-being can help decision makers evaluate policies that improve societies beyond economic development. Progress with well-being accounts has been notable: Prestigious scientific and international institutions have recommended the creation of such national accounts, and these recommendations have been adopted in some form in over 40 nations. In addition, increasing research into policy-relevant questions reveals the importance of the accounts for policy. Psychologists can enlarge their role in the formulation and adoption of policies by actively studying and using accounts of subjective well-being to evaluate and support the policies they believe are needed.*

**Keywords:** subjective well-being, national account, public policy

In a 2000 article in the *American Psychologist*, Diener proposed that nations should adopt National Accounts of Well-Being to parallel national accounts of the economy (Diener, 2000). National economic accounts are meant to assess production, income, labor, and market expenditures in nations. Diener's proposal was that nations should also track subjective and psychological well-being in order to give policymakers additional information that could be valuable to policy deliberations. *Subjective well-being* is defined as people's evaluations of their lives—the degree to which their thoughtful appraisals and affective reactions indicate that their lives are desirable and proceeding well. If policymakers knew not just how much policy implementation would cost but also how these policies would affect people's subjective well-being, they could consider this additional information when developing policies and evaluating potential policy alternatives. Although facets of the market economy are very important to quality of life, there are important factors, such as social relationships and a healthy natural environment, that are often not reflected in the economic measures. Because the measures of subjective well-being are known to be sensitive to a broad range

of facets of quality of life, they mirror not only economic prosperity but also other facets of quality of life as well.

National accounts of subjective well-being can reflect many different aspects of quality of life beyond the economy, and thus serve as an efficient way to assess many different aspects of quality of life combined. We cannot be certain whether a set of social indicators covers all the important facets of life, nor can we be certain how to combine and weight those interdependent facets. Subjective well-being accounts provide a summative measure of quality of life and weight the facets according to their impact on people's experience.

In 2004, Diener and Seligman (2004) wrote "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being," which explained why national economic accounts are not enough to reflect the quality of life in societies, and why this is especially true in the most economically developed countries. Progress since the publication of this article has continued. From 2005 to 2007, Diener hosted meetings at the University of Pennsylvania, where psychologists, philosophers, economists, and policymakers discussed the idea and form of national accounts of well-being. In 2005, Diener wrote broad guidelines for national accounts of well-being (Diener, 2005), and this document was signed by 50 economists, psychologists, and others. In 2009, Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, and Helliwell authored a volume in which they presented the reasons why national accounts of well-being would be useful (Diener et al., 2009).

In 2010, The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, announced that his country would assess subjective well-being as input to policy. The same year, the United Nations Development Program, in its decennial report, included a report of subjective well-being in the nations of the world. In 2013, the National Academy of Sciences of the United States issued a positive report on using measures of subjective well-being linked to time use (National Research Council, 2013). In the same year, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued guidelines for implementing national measures of subjective well-being (OECD, 2013b). This was an

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Ed Diener, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Department of Psychology, University of Utah, and The Gallup Organization; Shigehiro Oishi, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia; Richard E. Lucas, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ed Diener, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, PO Box 400400, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4400. E-mail: [ediener@illinois.edu](mailto:ediener@illinois.edu)

important step because the OECD helps to coordinate and publicize national statistics in the most economically developed countries in the world. In addition, the OECD (2013a) published a book summarizing the scores of nations in terms of 11 areas related to quality of life. These scores included not just income, but facets such as health and the environment, as well as life satisfaction.

Rapid progress is also evident in an examination of the nations that have now collected measures of subjective well-being as part of their national statistics. Figure 1 presents nations that have assessed subjective well-being in at least one survey conducted by a governmental or international agency. The four underlined nations have large ongoing longitudinal panel studies that include well-being measures. In addition to these governmental efforts, private organizations have also contributed to the understanding of national differences in well-being. The Gallup World Poll, <http://www.gallup.com/services/170945/world-poll.aspx> for instance, has now assessed subjective well-being in 165 societies around the globe.

## Characteristics of Societies High in Subjective Well-Being

We know several of the societal characteristics that predict high levels of subjective well-being (Oishi, 2012, for review). Importantly, these associations do not simply result from differences in wealth and income—they persist even when income is controlled. In addition, many of these associations have also been confirmed in longitudinal analyses. Next we list some of the most robust findings that may be relevant to the uses of national accounts of subjective well-being:

1. The happiest nations are economically developed and relatively wealthy (e.g., Diener, Kahneman, Tov, & Arora, 2010). The association between national income and well-being is likely because of the fact that people's basic needs and desires are met to a larger extent when they live in rich nations (e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011). Similarly, counties in the United States with the highest incomes tend to have the highest life satisfaction (Lawless & Lucas, 2011).

2. Nations high in subjective well-being are strong on the rule of law and human rights (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Helliwell, Huang, Grover, & Wang, 2014).

3. Nations high in subjective well-being tend to be lower in corruption (Helliwell et al., 2014; Tay, Herian, & Diener, 2014).

4. Happier societies have efficient and effective governments (e.g., Helliwell et al., 2014). Not only is quality of government services related to a nation's subjective well-being in cross-sectional analyses, it is found to vary with it over time.

5. Initial evidence suggests that taxation is more progressive in the nations with the highest subjective well-being (Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2012).

6. The nations that are highest in subjective well-being have income security programs, for example, adequate pensions, unemployment benefits, and support for the ill and disabled (Radcliff, 2013). They also have active public employment policies, including job training, employment incentives, and direct job creation (Easterlin & Switek, 2014).

7. The nations that are highest in subjective well-being have political freedoms, but at the same time, they also have regulations protecting property rights, employment laws, and sound money (Helliwell et al., 2014; Radcliff, 2013).

8. There is substantial evidence that unemployment harms subjective well-being (Helliwell & Huang, 2014; Lawless & Lucas, 2011; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; Luechinger, Meier, & Stutzer, 2010). Importantly, more generous unemployment policies seem to benefit the employed as well as the unemployed (Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2003). The negative impact of unemployment is not explained by lower income alone, and unemployment often leaves "scarring" that continues even after the individual is reemployed (Clark, Georgellis, & Sanfey, 2001).

9. It is not surprising that healthier places are also happier. For instance, counties in the United States with better health—for example, less death from heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, and lower rates of obesity—tend to be higher in life satisfaction (Lawless & Lucas, 2011). However, it also appears that places with more generous health care coverage have higher subjective well-being (Boarini, Comola, Smith, Manchin, & de Keulenaer, 2012). This might occur because places with higher government liberalism have better health (Herian, Tay, Hamm, & Diener, 2014).

10. Societies and neighborhoods high in life satisfaction have healthier natural environments, for example, clean air and ample green space (e.g., Luechinger, 2009; White, Alcock, Wheeler, & Depledge, 2013).

It is important to note that both governmental policies, as well as actions taken by those in the private sector, can influence these characteristics. For example, laws regulating automobile and factory emissions often influence air quality, which, in turn, affects subjective well-being. Income security through pensions, unemployment insurance, and compensation for the disabled all depend on govern-

**Figure 1**  
*Nations in Which a Governmental or International Agency Has Collected Measures of Subjective Well-Being*

<u>Australia</u>	France	New Zealand
Austria	<u>Germany</u>	Poland
Belgium	Greece	Switzerland
Finland	Hungary	Portugal
Iceland	Ireland	Romania
Bhutan	Italy	S. Korea
Bulgaria	Japan	Slovakia
Canada	Latvia	Slovenia
Chile	Lichtenstein	Spain
China	Netherlands	Sweden
Croatia	Norway	<u>Switzerland</u>
Cyprus	Lithuania	<u>United Kingdom</u>
Czech Rep.	Luxembourg	United States
Denmark	Malta	
Estonia	Mexico	

ment policies, and have been found to be associated with subjective well-being. At the same time, the policies of business organizations can also influence the well-being of employees as well as customers. Thus, the characteristics of happy societies and communities that lead to higher subjective well-being of citizens are substantially influenced by the policies of governments and other organizations.

## Why Accounts of Subjective Well-Being Are Imperative

Modern nations track many aspects of society to help guide policies and actions. For example, economically developed nations track characteristics of the economy, crime, education, and the quality of the environment. The numbers give needed information to policymakers and business leaders alike. There are many important reasons for monitoring the subjective well-being of societies.

### Assessing the Quality of Life in Societies, Groups, and Regions

The first reason for national accounts of subjective well-being is that they tend to reflect the quality of life of societies. Typically, quality of life has been measured by diverse measures such as economic, environmental, educational, and health measures. The problem is that the list is potentially endless—one can add an almost infinite number of qualities, including the fine arts, sports and exercise, spirituality, crime, and so forth. Furthermore, items on the list are often controversial, and there is no way to clearly weight them to provide an overall summary score. National accounts of subjective well-being solve this problem because they potentially incorporate all of the diverse factors that influence people's well-being, appropriately weighted by their importance in people's lives.

Although dozens of economic numbers are published on a daily basis and at great cost, people recognize that there is more to quality of life than is captured by the economic indicators. Diener and Seligman (2004) argued that as societies become wealthier and basic human needs are met, citizens tend to move beyond money, to factors such as need for mastery, for respect and trust, and for high-quality social relationships. Indeed, this idea is not new. In a well-known speech delivered in 1968, Robert Kennedy (March 18, at the University of Kansas) famously observed (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, n.d.):

Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community value in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product . . . counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm, and it counts nuclear warheads, and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the TV programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the

quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

Accounts of well-being will help to assess those factors that Kennedy pointed to, which economic accounts do not fully reflect. For example, we find in the Gallup World Poll that facets of quality of life in societies predict life satisfaction in them even controlling gross domestic product per capita—variables such as longevity, low corruption, and social support.

### Subjective Well-Being Is Desired by Citizens

Another reason to measure subjective well-being is that people highly value it. We found, for example, that college students value subjective well-being more than other valued items such as income, health, and even love (Diener, 2000; Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998). Thus, by tracking levels of well-being and identifying the causes of fluctuations in well-being, governments can do more to accomplish the goals and provide the outcomes that citizens most desire.

### Subjective Well-Being Has Desirable Consequences

It is also important to measure subjective well-being because research clearly reveals that it causes other outcomes that people desire—health and longevity, social relationships, good citizenship, and productivity at work (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). De Neve, Diener, Tay, and Xuereb (2013) review evidence showing that subjective well-being does not simply follow from good relationships, good health, and being effective at work, but increases the likelihood of these outcomes. People who are happier tend to be healthier and live longer than those who are angry, depressed, and fearful (e.g., Diener & Chan, 2011). In fact, positive affect predicts health outcomes even beyond the deleterious influences of negative affect. Diener, Kanazawa, Suh, and Oishi (2014) review evidence showing that positive moods would have been beneficial to evolutionary success, including factors such as fecundity and parenting.

Work in organizational psychology shows that happy workers are more productive workers and better organizational citizens (Brockerman & Ilmakunnas, 2012; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Organ, 1988). They also earn higher incomes (De Neve & Oswald, 2012; Diener, Nickerson, Lucas, & Sandvik, 2002; Graham, Eggers, & Sukhtankar, 2004; Koo & Suh, 2013; Marks & Fleming, 1999). De Neve and Oswald (2012), for example, found that adolescents who were higher in subjective well-being were later more likely to be hired, get promoted, and have higher incomes. Supporting the causal role of subjective well-being on productivity, Oswald, Proto, and Sgroi (2014) found that participants put in a positive mood were more productive than the control group, with no loss in

quality of work. Happy workers are more likely than unhappy workers to remain with the organization (e.g., Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). Furthermore, customer loyalty is higher when workers are happy (Harter et al., 2002), and satisfied workers have better safety records (e.g., Harter et al., 2002). Thus, it is not surprising that business organizations in which workers are happier, more engaged, and more satisfied with their work are more productive (e.g., Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010), and their share prices rise more rapidly over time (Edmans, 2012).

Luhmann, Lucas, Eid, and Diener (2013) found that higher life satisfaction predicts the likelihood of later getting married and not divorcing, as well as a lower probability of unemployment, a pattern that was replicated across three nations. Thus, experimental and longitudinal research supports a causal arrow moving from well-being to beneficial outcomes. Findings to date suggest that subjective well-being and quality of life have a dynamic relationship, with each increasing the likelihood of the other. In sum, an important reason for society to monitor subjective well-being and create policies to foster it is that high well-being leads to outcomes that societies highly desire.

### **Citizens as Well as Leaders Pay Attention to What Is Measured**

Psychologists hope that policymakers will pay attention to the psychological variables that we study. We also hope that they will pay attention to suffering as well as enjoyment in life in creating policies in the workplaces and by governments. It is often said that what is measured is what receives attention, and that measurement is a key to effective intervention programs. For instance, public interest in school performance in the United States results in part from the publicity surrounding measures that show that students in many other nations score higher on standardized tests of school learning. Similarly, unemployment receives widespread attention in the press because societies track it and publish statistics about it. Thus, national accounts of well-being will help focus attention on psychological variables that are important to quality of life.

### **A Few Policies Suggested by Well-Being Findings**

Beyond a broad understanding of what constitutes a good society and produces high subjective well-being of its citizens, can the national accounts give us any more specific information about policy alternatives? In the following section, we point to a few policies that are supported by subjective well-being findings (see also Oishi & Diener, 2014). We do not mean to suggest that the findings are currently always understood well enough to sway debates in the policy arena. Rather, we indicate the types of findings that would be relevant to policy if they are found to be valid and reliable. Second, we are not advocating that measures of well-being replace other measures such as economic ones. Rather, assessing well-being provides information that complements other measures.

### **Environmental Quality and Subjective Well-Being**

Research reveals that a healthy natural environment heightens well-being. Studies on green space, including experimental studies, quasi-experiments, experience sampling, and longitudinal studies suggest that people are happier in areas with parks, trees, and other greenery (e.g., Hartig, Evans, Jamner, Davis, & Garling, 2003; MacKerron & Mourato, 2013; Velarde, Fry, & Tveit, 2007; White et al., 2013). These studies have implications for zoning laws regarding green space.

A quasi-experimental study on air pollution from smokestacks indicated that it lowers subjective well-being. People living upwind or downwind from plants were assessed over time, while “scrubbers” (which remove much of the pollution from smokestack effluent) were installed (Luechinger, 2009; MacKerron & Mourato, 2009; Welsch, 2006). Those downwind from the smokestacks showed increasing life satisfaction after scrubber installation, whereas those upwind did not. These findings suggest that mandating “scrubbers” on smokestacks can be beneficial to well-being. Furthermore, they suggest that other regulations such as fuel-efficient and cleaner-burning cars might assist subjective well-being.

There is now a large amount of diverse evidence showing that long and difficult commutes tend to be unpleasant and can lower people’s subjective well-being (e.g., Frey & Stutzer, 2007; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004; Morris, 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2014a). Economists typically assume that people make choices to enhance their own well-being. Therefore, they assume that people who choose a long commute must do so rationally, balancing the unpleasantness of the commute against the higher overall quality of life that the suburbs provide. The research evidence suggests that this assumption might be wrong, and that the benefits of the distant home do not outweigh the unpleasantness of the trip to get there. Frey and Stutzer (2014) find that because people adapt more to income than they do to commuting, the increases in income they receive by commuting farther to work do not in fact increase their subjective well-being. Prior to the subjective well-being findings, the primary arguments against urban sprawl and suburbs was the environmental problems they cause—lost farmland, air pollution from cars, and loss of resources. However, the subjective well-being findings indicate that commuting often reduces workers’ overall well-being. Thus, policies that are based on mistaken economic assumptions about human nature may lead to undesirable policies that actually do more harm than good.

### **Income and Employment Policies Related to Well-Being**

As described earlier, income security and employment programs are associated with societal well-being. Having the security afforded by health insurance is related to higher feelings of well-being (Morris, 2011). Although unemploy-

ment lowers subjective well-being, unemployment benefits can reduce these negative effects. (e.g., Di Tella et al., 2003; Sjoberg, 2010). Radcliff (2013) found that generous welfare policies, as well as regulations that protect workers and consumers, are associated with higher subjective well-being (see also Davidson, Pacek, & Radcliff, 2013; Pacek & Radcliff, 2008a, 2008b). Similarly, Boarini et al. (2012) found that legal protections for employees, for example, requirements for severance pay and specific grounds for dismissal, were related to higher subjective well-being.

It is not just governments that can use well-being findings to craft policies, but businesses and other organizations can also use them. Research using job satisfaction and related measures point to the features of businesses that make them desirable places to work. For example, supervisors who are friendly and communicate with their subordinates in an open and clear manner are associated with happier workplaces (e.g., Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). A positive social atmosphere helps in general, as research shows that social support from other workers is strongly associated with higher well-being (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Beyond the social atmosphere at work, a job with autonomy and variety is associated with higher job satisfaction (Fried, 1991). Although some factors associated with work satisfaction, such as higher pay, cost the employer, many are not expensive, and higher worker satisfaction appears likely to lead to greater productivity and profitability.

### **Social Factors Related to Societal Well-Being**

Government policies to some extent can influence social interactions, and thereby influence subjective well-being. For instance, corruption is related to lower subjective well-being among the poor (Tay et al., 2014). Singapore has very low levels of corruption, which appear to be due largely to governmental laws and policies.

Zoning laws can influence friendship patterns in neighborhoods. Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, and Brunson (1998) discovered in a public housing project that communal green spaces facilitated interactions between neighbors. Thus, people living in apartments with more adjacent green spaces had lower levels of fear and less violent behavior. There was also less crime around the apartments with more nearby greenery (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Policy is relevant, in that zoning laws can require not only green space but also neighborhood planning that allows people to see and interact more frequently with their neighbors.

### **Psychologists and National Accounts of Well-Being**

Most of the policy-relevant research we reviewed thus far was conducted by economists, political scientists, and sociologists. Although psychologists have been at the forefront of basic research on subjective well-being, they rarely have been actively involved in using well-being figures in analyses relevant to policy issues (see, however, Ehret & Sherman, 2013; Penner, Blair, Albrecht, & Dovidio, 2014; Smart Richman & Hatzenbuehler, 2014, for policy-relevant

psychology research). For this reason, there are fewer studies on policy issues of most relevance to psychologists. Possibly, psychologists do not realize that the measures have the potential for analyzing outcomes in their own area of research. For instance, national accounts of well-being can reveal the misery caused by mental illness, for both the individual and his or her family and friends, and have the potential for revealing the positive effects of broad interventions, including public assistance programs. Social psychologists often study factors such as prejudice and diversity. Again, measures of well-being have the potential of revealing that reductions in discrimination can raise subjective well-being of citizens, both minority and nonminority alike.

There are many programs that psychologists believe will improve quality of life and psychological well-being. If so, this should be demonstrable by analyzing the subjective well-being measures in reference to these programs. Next we list possible policies and programs that would be of interest to psychologists and that might enhance well-being in communities and societies. Although there is little research on subjective well-being on many of these issues, they are offered as examples of how national accounts of subjective well-being might provide information that is relevant to policy.

1. Layard (2012) argues that better mental health programs can do more to increase the subjective well-being of societies than any other policy. Mental health is a major predictor of subjective well-being, mental disorders often go untreated, and yet there are effective treatments for many of them. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that increasing the availability of mental health services in many communities will significantly boost well-being in them.

2. Interventions to help caregivers of persons with dementia might boost their subjective well-being (e.g., Schulz & Martire, 2004).

3. Bullying could negatively affect children's subjective well-being (Office for National Statistics, 2014b), and it varies enormously across the economically developed nations of the world, from less than 5% to 25% (OECD, 2009). Thus, two hypotheses are that antibullying policies and programs can be effective and they will increase the subjective well-being of children.

4. Effective employment discrimination laws might raise the subjective well-being of workers (e.g., Moss & Huang, 2009).

5. Legalization of gay marriage might decrease stress and increase subjective well-being among LGB individuals (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010).

6. Because sexual harassment is associated with lowered subjective well-being (e.g., Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007), it is reasonable to hypothesize that effective sexual harassment laws will increase workers' subjective well-being.

7. Paradoxically, smoking regulation and taxation may improve the subjective well-being of smokers by leading more of them to quit, a behavioral change that has

been shown to benefit levels of well-being (Gruber & Mullainathan, 2005).

8. Many children in economically developed nations do not like school (OECD, 2009), and therefore schools should seek not only to increase learning but also to make the experience enjoyable.

9. Parenting skill education programs could boost children's subjective well-being (e.g., Kaveh, Moradi, Ghahremani, & Tabatabaee, 2014).

10. Parental-leave benefits could boost the subjective well-being of parents (Myrskylä & Margolis, 2013). It is noteworthy that even though labor-force participation may not be affected by such policies, they can boost subjective well-being. Thus, an economic analysis of these programs may incorrectly assume that the programs are not beneficial.

## Future Directions

The largest opportunity for psychologists is that they begin to broadly analyze their recommendations in terms of national accounts and other measures of psychological well-being. Policymakers are often skeptical of "soft" behavioral science data. Thus, we need much stronger evidence for the causal role of policy-relevant proposals for subjective well-being. Simple cross-sectional correlational findings will be subject to intense skepticism by leaders. Thus, we need more rigorous data than exists in many areas before the well-being findings will be seriously considered in policy debates.

There are myriad research and applied roles that psychologists can play in the implementation of policies that are supported by strong subjective well-being data. One example would be the use by forensic psychologists who consult on courtroom lawsuit cases. The SWB findings can be used to help set damages across a wide range of civil issues, for example, torts ranging from personal injury to employment discrimination, for which monetary values are difficult to set because the degree of suffering is a major issue (Swedloff & Huang, 2010). Psychologists working in the health care area can help establish funding, service, and research priorities based on the subjective well-being findings related to the amount of suffering produced by different illnesses. It is noteworthy in this regard that mental health is possibly the most underfunded in terms of the amount of suffering that lack of it produces. In virtually every area of applied psychology, uses can be found for the subjective well-being measures and findings.

Psychologists also need to be involved in validating and improve the measures of well-being. For example, Kahneman and colleagues (2004) recommend the use of daily reconstruction measures for research in areas that are relevant to policy because they can tie well-being scores to particular activities and events. This proposal opens up new avenues for research in many areas that are relevant to policy by not simply examining which individuals are "happy," but when and why people experience more or less subjective well-being as well.

Psychologists should also be actively involved in helping policy leaders interpret subjective well-being scores. For example, leaders will require help to decipher the meaning of ethnic and sociodemographic differences in the scores. Similarly, policymakers will need help in understanding causal direction, for example, whether unemployment causes or results from subjective well-being, or both. Psychologists should have special expertise in collecting and interpreting measures, as well as in improving the scales and indicating their limitations.

Psychologists need to borrow from economists the desire and ability to analyze policy issues in terms of relevant well-being data. To be sure, much training goes into the detailed analysis of policy decisions, and currently, most psychologists are not trained to do this. However, teaming with those who do this research, or at least engaging in debates about the relevance of psychological literature—and especially psychological research on subjective well-being—could potentially be very useful.

Applied psychologists can use well-being findings to improve practice in their domains. For example, organizational psychologists can do more to make management aware of the productivity benefits of worker well-being. Clinical psychologists can interweave into their practice the enhancement of well-being, not just the reduction in negative states. All types of applied psychologists can encourage the collection of well-being data that will shed light on policy and practice alternatives in their areas.

One question concerns what forms of well-being should be included in the measures. There are various components of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction, work satisfaction, positive feelings, and low negative feelings. Typically, the measures of these concepts are self-report scales, for example, of life satisfaction, often in very large samples, so as to get reliable estimates for specific target groups. However, smaller and more focused studies are conducted to validate and improve the self-report assessments (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013).

Psychologists need to be active in exploring the limitation of what well-being measures can tell us related to policy alternatives. We need to better understand what the measures can and cannot show, as well as biases that might influence them. Psychologists should also be at the forefront of research on additional measures of psychological well-being for policy, such as measures of relationship strength, mastery, loneliness, psychosomatic symptoms, meaning and purpose in life, and so forth. Presently, most nations using measures of well-being focus on life satisfaction, but a broader approach is needed. Researchers should also examine the types of circumstances that most influence various types of well-being. An important research agenda is to discover which types of psychological well-being are most relevant to which types of policy questions. The measures of subjective well-being have given us an entrée, but we need to explore additional dimensions of well-being that might be as relevant or even more relevant to policy.

## Conclusions

Nations are adopting national accounts of subjective well-being, and several prestigious organizations have issued guidelines for doing so. Scores on subjective well-being measures can give information to policymakers that will be frequently helpful in crafting new policies. We believe that most psychologists do not know about the advances that have occurred regarding the increased use of well-being measures for these purposes. In addition, they often do not recognize how the measures can be used to test and confirm the policies they advocate. Readers with concerns about the measures and using them for policy are referred to Diener et al. (2009), which answers many of the objections. Although data are not yet sufficient in most areas to provide strong policy recommendations, this possibility for the future is an appealing challenge for both research and applied psychologists.

Current findings point to certain features that characterize happy societies, such as income security programs, health care security, and a clean and green environment. The findings also point to certain specific policies that societies should implement, such as zoning for green space and reducing commuting. Whereas economists have frequently used the measures of subjective well-being to draw inferences about desirable policies, psychologists have rarely done so. Thus, the accounts of well-being represent a new opportunity for psychologists to provide useful information to policymakers. Many of the policies advocated by psychologists are likely to increase quality of life, and therefore to be manifested in measures of subjective well-being. Psychologists should consult this tool more frequently when advocating for the policies that they believe are desirable.

The income and security programs of governments are associated with higher subjective well-being, and it must be acknowledged that these are consistent with a politically liberal agenda. However, there are also findings that are consistent with conservative positions. For instance, recent research findings suggest that marriage can boost happiness, even after controlling initial levels of happiness (e.g., Anusic, Yap, & Lucas, 2014; Yap, Anusic, & Lucas, 2012). In addition, conservative regions of the United States report high levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2006). Further, conservatives value economic growth, and income and income growth are, to some extent, associated with higher subjective well-being (Diener, Tay, & Oishi, 2013; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). Thus, whereas findings on income support and security programs are consistent with a liberal agenda, other findings do not conflict with a politically conservative viewpoint. Therefore, the accounts of well-being should not face inevitable obstruction because it favors one political approach over another.

The Conservative Party Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, mirrored the thoughts of Robert Kennedy when he introduced the new measures of subjective well-being in his country. He announced that “we’ll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how

our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life” (GOV.UK., n.d.; November 25, 2010). In 2006, Cameron stated,

Wellbeing can’t be measured by money or traded in markets. It’s about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and, above all, the strength of our relationships. Improving our society’s sense of wellbeing is, I believe, the central political challenge of our times.” (Google Zeitgeist Europe Conference, May 22).

Thus, it is not just political liberals who believe that measures of well-being can help inform policy discussions.

We do not mean to oversell measures of well-being for policy; there are significant obstacles to policymakers using them. Yet there has been much progress, and therefore there appears to be promise in this direction. One challenge is to obtain stronger data linking policy alternatives to subjective well-being outcomes. The data must be collected in such a way that they can shed light on policy debates. Another challenge is to convince policymakers of the validity and usefulness of the measures. Although the challenges are substantial, the rapid progress in adoption of societal measures of well-being suggests that efforts can be worthwhile.

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