

EDITORIAL

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN AFRICA

Ferdi Botha and Jen Snowball

Department of Economics and Economic History
Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
f.botha@ru.ac.za; j.snowball@ru.ac.za

Research on quality of life and subjective well-being (SWB) has witnessed a remarkable growth over the past four decades or so. Since Easterlin's (1974) seminal contribution on the relationship between happiness and income, thousands of studies have followed that examine the intricacies of subjective well-being (for reviews, see Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Dolan *et al.*, 2008; MacKerron, 2012). These studies have uncovered some very important aspects of individual well-being and have pointed to the fact that money or income is not always (as is often assumed) the most important determinant of SWB.

Economics has a long history of research into the welfare and well-being of individuals living in different nations and circumstances. However, until quite recently, standard macroeconomic statistics, such as GDP or income per capita, were used as proxies for well-being. What subjective measures of well-being have shown, however, is that, once a basic level of per capita income has been achieved, subjective well-being may not be closely correlated to further increases in income. Factors such as personal safety, personal relationships, health, religious freedom and the ability to influence democratic processes may be just as important in enhancing human well-being. Several international databases on subjective well-being are now available. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Better Life Index was launched in 2011 in response to a call to develop internationally comparable measures of well-being, whereas the World Database of Happiness (managed by Ruut Veenhoven of Rotterdam University) also seeks to collate existing research to allow for meaningful international comparisons.

UNISA



African Review of Economics and Finance
Volume 7 | Number 1 | 2015
pp. 1-5

Print ISSN 2042-1478 | Online ISSN 2410-4906
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A number of journals are also committed to publishing work within the area of subjective well-being, particularly journals such as *Social Indicators Research*, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *Applied Research in Quality of Life* and *International Journal of Well-Being*.

The increase in academic journal publications has been met by a rising number of books on the subject of subjective well-being, including country case studies, theoretical monographs and edited volumes. *The science of subjective well-being* (2008), edited by Eid and Larson, is one such example and has been reviewed by Adu-Gyamfi for this special edition of *African Review of Economics and Finance*. The book focuses on the contributions of Ed Diener and addressed such topics as the measurement and determinants of well-being, including comparisons between different cultures and between developed and developing nations.

Nevertheless, the majority of subjective well-being research has to date been conducted in the developed world, and, although steadily increasing, research using data from developing countries is relatively scarce. Africa, in particular, has received very little attention in the study of subjective well-being. Such a lack of research could be attributed partly to the absence of relevant and reliable data for many African countries. However, subjective well-being measures have been used in Africa since the 1980s, mainly by Valerie Møller in the South African Quality of Life Trends Project (Møller, 2013), and more recent South African survey data to study how life satisfaction relates to issues such as racial group (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2013), family functioning (Botha and Booysen, 2014), and relative standing (Posel and Casale, 2011). Some work has also been conducted using Ghanaian data (Pokimica *et al.*, 2012; Addai *et al.*, 2014). Compared to international research, however, Africa still lags far behind in terms of our understanding of subjective well-being, especially in nations other than South Africa. Given the need for additional research into issues of subjective well-being within an African context, this special edition of the *African Review of Economics and Finance* brings together examples of subjective well-being research from Africa to showcase a number of recent advances, point out gaps in the literature, and suggest directions for future research.

Using data from the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) conducted in 2008, Von Fintel investigates whether race-related reference groups that existed prior to 1994 are still prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa. Von Fintel found that subjective well-being is no longer dependent on race-specific relative income, although perceived relative income is important for subjective well-being overall. However, a race-specific reference group still remains significant for individuals below the poverty line, most of whom are black. These findings are explained partly by the racial integration that occurred post-1994: such integration has been most prevalent among higher-income black individuals who now live in more diverse communities and neighbourhoods, and subsequently compare themselves to persons from different race groups. Poor, black South Africans, on the other hand, still live

mainly in racially homogenous areas and therefore continue to view their neighbours as their reference group.

Also using 2008 NIDS data, Posel and Casale examine potential discrepancies in life satisfaction between married and cohabiting South Africans. Although previous South African research has examined subjective well-being differences between those in marriage and in cohabitation, what makes this study particularly unique is that the focus is on matched couples. This allows for the examination of life satisfaction differences within households, between partners. Posel and Casale note, for example, that most couples do not report the same levels of life satisfaction. These differences are explained to a large extent by traditional gender roles and responsibilities within the household. Moreover, there is evidence of a positive spousal correlation in life satisfaction that can be attributed partly to assortative matching on life satisfaction.

As the article on marriage and subjective well-being by Addai *et al.* demonstrates, context matters. Quality of life studies from developed countries have tended to find that subjective well-being is positively associated with being married. However, this article reports interesting differences in this relationship within the more traditional Ghanaian society, where marriages are still largely arranged by families on behalf of their children. Women, in particular, tend to marry young: the 2008 *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey* found that, despite social transformation seeking to improve the rights of women, 25 per cent of girls were married, or in some form of spousal union, before they turned 18. Using data from the Ghanaian portion of the 2005–2008 *World Values Survey*, Addai *et al.* use bivariate analysis to show that marriage is negatively associated with both happiness and life satisfaction for men and women in this context. An econometric analysis shows that the odds of being happy are 30 per cent lower for married people compared to their unmarried counterparts. The relationship between marital status and life satisfaction or happiness also does not differ significantly by gender.

Subjective well-being studies can also be used to explain and predict such social phenomena as the cyclical fluctuations in xenophobia that have been a negative feature of post-apartheid life in South Africa. Using the National Well-being Index (NWI), Gordan explores the relationship between negative perceptions of foreigners and satisfaction with national quality of life (including such indicators as the economic situation, the state of the natural environment, and national security) and personal quality of life (related to health, achievements, personal relationships, and feelings of safety). Gordan finds that, the lower the score on the NWI, the more likely a person is to have negative perceptions of foreigners, including beliefs that foreigners cause increases in crime, unemployment and disease, and impose a burden on the state. In addition to this expected result, the research showed that, contrary to expectations, those with higher levels of education are more likely to blame immigrants for crime than those with lower educational attainment are.

Using a qualitative research method based on Amartya Sen's capability approach, Schenck and Blaauw examine the perceptions of poverty and subjective well-being of those Namibians classified as 'poor'. Employing data from the Participatory Poverty Assessments reports conducted by the Namibian National Planning Commission, the authors found that individuals view poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. Although money is deemed important for improved individual well-being, the enhancement of capabilities, opportunities, and choices are described as forming a more central part in improving subjective well-being.

A common feature of all the articles in this volume is the call for increased data collection, informed by international best practice, in order to enable international cross-sectional comparisons, and to examine changing subjective well-being and its determinants over time. Furthermore, while the original intention of this special issue was to solicit manuscripts dealing with a broad range of African nations, the articles submitted for consideration all focused on a narrow group of countries: in this final volume, three studies use South African data, one focuses on Namibia and the other on Ghana. Clearly, there is an imperative for subjective well-being research to be conducted using data from other African nations as well, notwithstanding the potential data limitations often encountered when studying African issues.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

FERDI BOTHA is Senior Lecturer in Economics at Rhodes University, South Africa. He holds a Master's degree in Applied Econometrics from the University of the Free State, and is currently enrolled for a PhD in Socio-Economic Sciences at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. His research interests are focused on quality of life studies, applied microeconometrics, and the economics of the family.

JEN SNOWBALL is a Professor of Economics at Rhodes University, with a PhD in Economics from the same university. She is a Senior Researcher at the South African Cultural Observatory, which measures and monitors the impact of the cultural industries. Her research interests are focused mainly in the field of cultural economics (or the economics of arts and culture). She has also worked in quality of life studies, environmental and natural resource economics, and local economic development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to the anonymous referees who provided excellent comments and suggestions on previous drafts of the selected articles. We are also grateful to Prof. Paul Alagidede, the Editor-in-Chief of this journal, for sharing our enthusiasm for the publication of this special issue and for making it possible for us to pursue this

project in *AREF*. The Editor of *AREF*, Dr. Franklin Obeng-Odoom, also assisted in soliciting the book review included in this special issue, and we are appreciative of that assistance.

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