

BOOK REVIEW

The science of subjective well-being, Michael Eid, Randy J. Larsen (Editors), The Guilford Press, New York, 2008, 491pp. ISBN-13: 978-1606230732

Reviewed by Samuel Adu-Gyamfi

Department of History and Political Studies,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana
mcgyamfi@yahoo.com

The science of subjective well-being is a collection of works by important authors in the field of subjective well-being (SWB). It is categorised into six major sections: The realm of subjective well-being; Measuring subjective well-being; The happy person; Subjective well-being in the interpersonal domain; Making people happier; and Conclusions and future directions. In addition, there is an introductory article by Randy J. Larsen and Michael Eid on the contributions of Ed Diener to the science of subjective well-being, which forms the foundation on which all other sections are based.

The introductory article by Larson and Eid highlights the contribution Diener has made to the field through a review of his extensive body of empirical work, integrative review papers, edited volumes, wide-ranging collaborations, the popular press, and his success in training a substantial number of well-equipped PhD and post-doctoral students. The chapter arranges Diener’s work into a number of themes. ‘The measurement of subjective well-being’, for example, focuses on Diener’s development of measurement procedures for the affective components of subjective well-being, such as the intensity and frequency of emotion. Diener was one of the first to argue that subjective well-being could be assessed through self-reporting with a substantial degree of reliability and validity.

Diener’s research, under the sub-theme of ‘Determinants of subjective well-being’, has shown that there is no sole determinant of SWB. Conditions like mental health and positive social relationships are necessary, but not sufficient, for SWB. Other suggested determinants are extraversion and neuroticism (as stated by Costa and McCrae, 1980) and individual genetic composition or DNA endowment. Diener, however, argued against the idea that DNA determines happiness for a number of reasons, including that there is a fair amount of variability in happiness over time, in response to different life events. In ‘The consequences of subjective well-



being', Diener explored the impact of happiness on a person's life. Findings show that happier people are more likely to fulfill their goals or aspirations, demonstrate socially desirable behaviours, be more social and altruistic, have strong conflict resolution skills and be healthier.

Under the sub theme, 'Cross-cultural research on subjective well-being', Larson and Eid discuss international differences in subjective well-being. They note that subjective well-being is positively correlated with higher income levels, individualism, better human rights and societal equality. Common determinants in most countries include extraversion and marriage. However, there are also differences, with SWB in developed countries being affected more by personal emotions and self-esteem, while for developing nations, the major determinant is financial resources.

Diener and Seligman (2004) also argue that SWB indicators are useful at a national level, to inform policy and track development. Their findings show that citizens with high levels of SWB facilitate better governance, increase the wealth of a nation by earning more money and creating more opportunities for others, they are more productive and profitable, healthier and live longer, are less prone to mental disabilities and create more satisfying social relationships.

Having set out a broad framework for SWB research, the remainder of the book explores aspects of the field in more detail. In 'The science of subjective well-being', Heybron explores the phases of its development, e.g., within theories of well-being philosophers distinguish two types of happiness: hedonism, and life satisfaction theory. Hedonists identify happiness as the balance of pleasurable with unpleasant experiences, while life satisfaction theories identify happiness with having a favourable attitude towards life. The remaining three chapters in the section explore the contribution of various disciplines to the SWB field, including sociology and evolutionary psychology. McMahan contributes a chapter on 'The pursuit of happiness in history', which traces the field in ancient Greek philosophy, and Christian thought during the Enlightenment and in modern America, including the work of John Stuart Mill.

The second section of the book, 'Measuring subjective well-being', starts with a chapter on the 'Structure of subjective well-being' by Schimmack. Building on one of Diener's early articles (1984) in the *Psychological Bulletin*, the chapter examines the structural relationships between specific well-being domains (such as health) and overall SWB. Bottom-up and top-down theories assume that life satisfaction and domain satisfaction correlations reflect a casual influence between domain satisfaction and life satisfaction. However, it is possible that the correlation is due to the substantial causal effect of another variable that independently influences domain satisfaction and life satisfaction. The article further discusses the theories in a wider perspective.

In 'The assessment of subjective well-being', Pavot discusses the growing demand for instruments and methodologies designed to assess these constructs. To

a large extent, progress in the development of valid measures and methodologies has kept pace with the increase in demand for them. However, despite substantial advances in SWB assessment, the development of a broadly based, consistent and comprehensive empirical database of SWB findings has been realised only partially. Factors such as an overreliance on higher method, cross-sectional design and the use of narrow measures that provide only partial assessment of subjective well-being, have combined to limit the generalisability of the findings from individual studies.

In 'Measuring the immeasurable: Psychometric modelling of subjective well-being data' Eid explores the question whether SWB can be measured and why it has interested researchers from different fields for many years. Like any other measure in the social and behavioural sciences, measures of subjective well-being have to prove their reliability and validity.

While space constraints prevent further detailed reviews of the other sections of the book, the work highlights some of the seminal research of Ed Diener that has shaped the science of SWB. While reviewing some of Diener's work, *The science of subjective well-being* also adds information on new developments within the ongoing debate on happiness and subjective well-being in a broader perspective. It is a useful edited work, which will be valuable to any SWB researcher considering method or approach.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

DR. SAMUEL ADU-GYAMFI is the first trained social historian of medicine from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi-Ghana. He lectures in the Department of History and Political Studies in the same university. His main area of interest is the social history of medicine. His focus has been to develop and teach the history of science and technology, the history of medicine worldwide, and specifically in Africa, the history of health policy and hospital administration as well as the social and political history of Ghana. He is a patron of the Historical Society of KNUST and a major discussant and resource person in the Ghanaian media landscape. He focuses his discussions on politics, health, religion and development among other areas. Dr. Samuel Adu-Gyamfi looks forward for future collaborations in areas that focus on social sciences and medicine and developmental issues in Africa.