Beyond Subjective Well-being: A Critical Review of the Stiglitz Report Approach to Subjective Perspectives on Quality of Life

Sarah C. White\textsuperscript{1}
Stanley O Gaines Jr.\textsuperscript{2}
Shreya Jha\textsuperscript{1}
\textsuperscript{1}University of Bath, \textsuperscript{2}Brunel University
EADI/DSA Conference University of York
20 September 2011
‘Another key message, and unifying theme of the report, is that the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being.’

(Stiglitz et al., 2009:12, original emphasis)
Background

• Stiglitz report commissioned by President Sarkozy, 2008
• Led by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen
• Remit to look at alternatives to GDP in measuring national level statistical data about society and economy
• Highly influential: e.g. UK ONS consultation 2011 on what matters to people
• *Not* that subjective should replace objective – alternative indicator alongside others
• Welcome the way report has strengthened place of wellbeing on international agenda and subjective perspectives on quality of life
• But concern at limited approach that is taken to this, and the potential implications if this is adopted uncritically
• Issues:
  – Limited focus
  – Methods/measures /concepts
  – Universally applicable?
  – Politics – including north/south

• Drawing on 1st year of wellbeing pathways research (Zambia, India)
Subjective well-being: the concept

• ‘Subjective measures of quality of life’ identified with subjective well-being (SWB) – becomes a quasi domain of its own
• Apparent simplicity: asking people directly about satisfaction and positive/negative emotions (‘affect’)
• People self-report, so take own values into account

But:
• What is it? A means of measurement that has become reified into a property of persons?
• Synthetic – combination of 2 measures designed for different purposes
• More – or less – than happiness?
• Other approaches, even within psychology, look at functioning and fulfilment – is SWB slim or thin?
One size fits all?

Our research suggests cultural and economic context plays a much greater part in shaping both inner wellbeing and the methods used to measure it:

• Cultures of questioning: Abstract and generaised vs specific and tangible
• Indirect vs direct cultures of expression: implications through more general statements: ‘the life of a woman!’ or stories
• Questions about the future led to response ‘who can tell what the future will hold?’
• Many statements about self are difficult: negative statements may be feared to attract the evil eye; comparisons with others may be seen as invidious; professing pride in one’s own achievements may be seen as inappropriate
A new vision of the world?

Adrian White,
University of Leicester, 2007
Politics of SWB

• Potential of wellbeing to challenge conventional north-south polarities
• But increasingly SWB used to reinforce them: former Communist and Islamic countries ‘quite joyless’, Latin America ‘high levels of affect’
• Good for development studies (poverty also makes people unhappy)?
• Or dangerous: another axis for the claim of western superiority?
Conclusion

• SWB is one way of assessing subjective perspectives, but there are alternatives, even within the psychology literature
• Need to question universality: much more attention needed to cultural bias within the concepts and means of measurement
• Where is the subject in the subjective?
  – Is there some collective bad faith in seeking ‘objective’ evidence from subjective indicators?
  – Need assess subjective across domains, not contain it in one
  – Need to make space for the qualitative – hear the subaltern speak!
• Watch the politics and reversion to ‘West is Best’ narrative

See also: www.wellbeingpathways.org