

Steps Toward a Science of Well-Being

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Are you happy right now? Is reading this article an enjoyable use of your time or are you already reaching to turn the page? What about your life in general? Are you satisfied? Daniel Kahneman wants to know. For the last 10 years, he has been working to develop a standard measure of well-being that is respected by economists, as well as psychologists and sociologists, and can be used in policy decisions. The Nobel Prize-winning researcher at Princeton University presented his latest work at the APS 18th Annual Convention in his invited address, “Steps Toward a Science of Well-Being.”

The standard definition of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) takes account of three factors – high life satisfaction, positive affect, and absence of negative affect – although most research focuses on life satisfaction. For each person, two different “selves” determine all these factors: the experiencing self, ourselves while we are doing the living (whether or not you want to turn the page yet); and the evaluating self, the self that is based on memory (how you remember this article in a few hours). The latter self reflects on the memories generated by the experiencing self and comes to conclusions. These conclusions can be quite wrong about what actually happened, creating a conundrum for many researchers. So, *experienced happiness*, how we feel in the moment, and *reported life satisfaction*, which is produced by the evaluating self, are both necessary to understanding well-being but must be measured separately to get a picture of our well-being that is both accurate and comprehensive.

Previously, the most popular way to measure experienced happiness was experience sampling, having participants answer questions about what they were doing and how they felt at various points throughout the day using a handheld computer. This method gets in touch with the experiencing self, but giving each subject their own device and getting them to accurately report when they are supposed to, is cumbersome and expensive.

Kahneman and his colleagues have developed a new technique, the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM). In this method, participants fill out a questionnaire about a previous day. Each participant divides the day into episodes (i.e. woke up, got dressed, ate breakfast, commuted to work, morning meeting, etc.) and answers a series of questions about what they were doing and how they felt during each episode. This method results in an abundance of data, which Kahneman and his colleagues cull into two main general measures for each participant. The first, Difmax, is the person’s “Happy” score minus whichever is highest of his or her tense, depressed or angry scores. According to Kahneman, they only pick the highest negative score because, “you don’t have to be tense, depressed, and angry for that to be a lousy time of day; just one of those is enough.” Another measure generated for each person is the U-Index, the proportion of time during which negative affect predominates (when Difmax is less than zero).

In his most recent project, Kahneman and his colleagues used this method to learn about the well-being of 700 women in Columbus, Ohio and another 700 in Rennes, France. The researchers expected dramatic differences between the countries, but in reality, most of the differences were slight. Americans

were more likely to report being “Very Satisfied,” but that was because Americans were more empathetic across the board. “More happy and more unhappy...they’re just more!” quipped Kahneman. In both samples, quality of sleep was highly correlated with satisfaction. In terms of what people enjoy doing the results were also similar, with making love and “play” topping the list in both countries and commuting and work at the bottom of the list. French women did rate time caring for their own children as more enjoyable, prompting a call for future research on what is making childcare less pleasant for American women.

The dichotomy between experienced happiness and life satisfaction is one of the most interesting results of this latest study. Being happy does not mean that one is satisfied. Participants who were married, educated, white, employed, not in medical treatment, had a high household income and/or had a low Body Mass Index were more likely to be satisfied overall, but not more likely to experience more happiness while going about their daily activities. For example, married people generally report higher life satisfaction, even though they do more compulsory and fewer discretionary activities. These negatives are balanced by the fact that they spend less time alone and probably by a lower incidence of depression.

Kahneman challenged his listeners that the key question for future study is “how to maximize both life satisfaction and happiness without assuming that maximizing one will automatically maximize the other.” His next target group is the Danish, “the true world champions of well-being.” Maybe they have the answer.