Will Well-Being Replace Money?

We titled this monograph “Beyond Money,” not “Instead of Money.” It would be sophomoric to believe that people will soon forsake their desires for substantial amounts of goods and services. In the introduction, we suggested that economic models served well when needs went largely unmet, but that these models are less relevant in a time of plenty. However, the money economy has too strong a proven track record for either individuals or nations to quickly abandon it. Not only have capitalism and the industrial revolution at times led to rampant consumerism, but they have allowed large advances in sanitation, education, health, parks, and even, perhaps, virtue (Easterbrook, 2003). At the individual level, the economic model allows people to structure their time in the pursuit of concrete goals, and to readily track progress toward specific goals. It is possible that people derive considerable well-being from goal pursuits related to earning income, and from the activities of consumption, and therefore even a well-being economy will include these activities. Thus, although lamentations about how economic activity can interfere with family and religion are often heard, it is likely that the economic model will remain dominant for many decades to come. We do not contest this fact of life.

Well-being is not a panacea that will in itself solve all of the world’s problems. Even if well-being one day becomes the dominant paradigm, it must be supplemented by other values of societies, and people must be socialized for humane values for the well-being economy to be a desirable concept.

One challenge for a society based on well-being is that individuals do not have ready and concrete models of how to pursue the goal of greater well-being, other than following the economic model. When people are asked what would improve the quality of their lives, the most frequent response is higher income (Campbell, 1981). It is not clear to people how they would achieve greater positive emotions and life satisfaction. Until there are concrete and proven steps toward these noneconomic aims, people are unlikely to abandon the dominant economic paradigm. Thus, psychologists need to demonstrate compellingly the malleable factors that can increase well-being before the well-being paradigm can replace the economic one. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the theoretical models on which the economic model is based are in many cases more sophisticated than current scientific models of well-being. Therefore, although an economy focused on well-being might be an important long-term goal, in the short term it is sufficient to suggest that well-being indicators will complement economic ones.

THE CENTRAL PLACE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN CREATING NATIONAL WELL-BEING

We reviewed in the previous sections several of the factors that lead to well-being—to frequent pleasant emotions and engagement, to finding meaning and satisfaction in life, and to low levels of stress and depression. The existing findings suggest the following partial formula for high well-being:

- Live in a democratic and stable society that provides material resources to meet needs
- Have supportive friends and family
- Have rewarding and engaging work and an adequate income
- Be reasonably healthy and have treatment available in case of mental problems
- Have important goals related to one’s values
- Have a philosophy or religion that provides guidance, purpose, and meaning to one’s life

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If high well-being is the overarching goal of all nations, national indicators of well-being are crucial to assessing the impact of national and corporate policies. Rudimentary indicators of well-being are now available, and they provide the fascinating findings reviewed here. But much better measures are needed.

Economic indicators have for the most part served society well. However, these indicators have glaring shortcomings as approximations, even first approximations, of well-being. Scientists are now in the position to assess well-being directly, and therefore should establish a system of national measures of well-being to supplement the economic measures. Indeed, it can be argued that the well-being measures should be the central ones, and that the economic indices are best understood in their relation to enhancing well-being. We have reviewed a number of important factors that influence well-being but are not captured by existing indicators, and we have shown the benefits of well-being in producing a successful society. It is time to grant well-being a prominent place in policy discussions.

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