HAPPINESS QUESTIONS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSES: A PILOT STUDY OF WHAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC MAKES OF IT ALL

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Happiness questions and government responses: A pilot study of what the general public makes of it all

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The results from interviews conducted with 51 respondents represent a small contribution to an empirical research agenda designed to find out what goes into wellbeing reports and the appropriateness for policy analysis of what comes out. It appears that life satisfaction ratings are retrospective assessments of how life has gone thus far, or at least how the last few years have gone. Most respondents would be reluctant to take a pill to improve their life satisfaction. Respondents were also generally in favour of providing good public services and perhaps promoting the conditions for happiness rather than focussing on happiness itself. Some people did not think the government should be responsible for promoting happiness directly and others were against happiness as a goal of policy because people were seen as being too different for policies to actually make any difference. Convincing people like these of the merits of policies designed to improve SWB requires the development of good measures and design of good policies.

happiness - subjective wellbeing - public policy - public opinion

Questions sur le bonheur et réponses du gouvernement : une étude pilote de ce que le public fait de tout cela

Les résultats de questionnaires administrés à 51 personnes représentent une modeste contribution à la recherche empirique visant à comprendre les enquêtes de bien-être et leur pertinence pour les décisions politiques. Il apparaît que les taux de satisfaction avec la vie sont des évaluations de la vie passée, ou du moins de la vie au cours des années récentes. La plupart des répondants seraient réticents à prendre une pilule qui augmenterait leur satisfaction. Les répondants sont généralement en faveur de la fourniture de services publics et de la promotion des conditions du bonheur plutôt que de la promotion du bonheur en tant que tel. Ils pensent que les gens sont trop différents pour que l'Etat puisse avoir une influence directe. Convaincre ces personnes des mérites de politiques visant à l'amélioration du bien-être subjective requiert le développement de bons indicateurs et la conception de bonnes politiques.

bonheur - bien-être subjectif - politique publique - opinion publique

1. Introduction

The recent and influential report commissioned by French President Nicholas Sarkozy recommends that « Measures of both objective and subjective well-being provide key information about people's quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people's life evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own survey. » (Stiglitz *et al.* [2009]). The Commission also recognised that « We are almost blind [in guiding the economy] when the metrics on which action is based are ill-designed or when they are not well understood. For many purposes, we need better metrics. Fortunately, research in recent years has enabled us to improve our metrics, and it is time to incorporate in our measurement systems some of these advances. »

We do know that life satisfaction questions of the sort widely used in large-scale surveys around the world (*e.g.* World Values Survey, Eurobaromoter, British Household Panel Survey) appear to be relatively reliable and sensitive and show good convergent and discriminatory validity ; that is, they show similar patterns to more complex scales and reflect objective circumstances in understandable ways (Dolan *et al.* [2008]). We know relatively little, however, about what people think about when reporting their SWB, or about the idea of improving SWB as an explicit policy goal.

Normative debate and applied policy discussions can both be informed by studies that seek to « get behind the numbers » (Dolan *et al.* [1999]) and that directly address the question of what should be measured for which purposes in a public policy context (Haybron, 2008). The pilot studies described here are our first tentative steps in exploring these issues.

2. Methods

We presented small convenience samples of public sector workers in Sheffield with standard life satisfaction and domain satisfaction questions and asked them to think aloud while answering them (Study 1), or identify which of a range of thoughts were most relevant to them while answering (Study 2). The questions are described in detail in the results. In both studies, we also presented respondents with a number of statements concerning the possible goals of government policy. These statements were selected to explore whether people felt improvements in SWB should be a major policy goal and if not what the alternatives should be.

2.1. Study 1

Study 1 was an interview study with 20 respondents (13 female, mean age 35 yrs), who were paid £10 for taking part. Interviews were tape recorded

and took around 45 minutes. Analysis was conducted both on the quantitative data and on the verbal responses which were explored for various themes. In addition to a demographics section, there were seven key sections designed to explore how people reacted to various wellbeing questions from different theoretical perspectives, and particularly in relation to the degree to which governments should intervene to promote wellbeing.

Section A asked global and domain satisfaction questions and Section D asked about the amount of time people spend in certain affective states. Sections B and G asked people to place a value on what a certain increase in life satisfaction or change in quality of life would be worth to them. Section C attempted to establish a trade-off ratio between the domains of income, health and social contact. In an attempt to explore what people thought happiness was based on, Section E explored people's attributions of happiness in terms of the degree to which it was based on genetics, circumstances or activities and outlook. To understand what people thought government should do about happiness, Section F explored the degree to which various definitions of well-being were seen as politically legitimate policy targets.

2.2. Study 2

Study 2 was a questionnaire study that built on the results of Study 1. There were 31 respondents (16 female, mean age 35 yrs), each paid £10, and the questionnaire took around 10 minutes to complete. In Section A, respondents were asked a standard life satisfaction question and asked to select from a range of possibilities what domains and time frame they had considered when answering this question. They were also asked something similar with respect to their satisfaction with their health. In Section B, they were asked to select from a range of possible reasons why they thought various definitions of wellbeing should or should not be the main goal of government policy.

3. Results

3.1. Study 1

3.1.1. Section A : Satisfaction questions

The questions for section A were as follows : « How dissatisfied or satisfied are you with : a) your life overall ; b) your health ; c) the income of

you're household ; d) the amount of leisure time you have ; e) your personal relationships » (with responses a 7 point scale from 1 « *Not satisfied* » to 7 « *Completely satisfied* »). Questions a to d are identical to those used in the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). In addition, respondents were asked to talk through their answers. The mean responses and correlations between items can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. **Means and correlations for satisfaction questions in Study 1**

	Means	(SD)	Bivariate Correlations				
			Global	Health	Income	Leisure	Relations
Global	4.69	(1.48)	-				
Health	4.91	(1.27)	.63**	-			
Income	4.66	(1.78)	.25	.28	-		
Leisure	4.09	(1.76)	.36	.13	-.14	-	
Relations	5.27	(1.63)	.78***	.68***	.27	.37	-

Our sample was fairly satisfied with their life overall ($M = 4.69$). This is lower than the overall average for the BHPS mean response which is around 5.3. Public sector employees have been found to experience slightly higher levels of life satisfaction, at least in robust analysis of the German equivalent of the BHPS (Luechinger *et al.* [2008]). So the difference here could be down to the non-representativeness, and relatively small size, of our sample.

People were particularly happy with their current relationships less satisfied with their amount of leisure time ($M = 4.20$). The leisure time rating is also lower than the BHPS value of 4.8 but some of this difference may be due to the fact that these interviews took place during work time. Since we know that context can play an important part in life satisfaction ratings (Schwarz and Strack [1999]), we need to be careful when comparing results across studies where contextual factors differ.

The simple correlations between the global and domain judgements suggest that global life satisfaction is more associated with satisfaction with relationships and health than it is with the leisure and income. Regression analyses entering global life satisfaction as the dependent variable and domain satisfactions as the predictors suggested some interesting results (Table 2). In line with the simple correlations, relationships and health emerged as the strongest predictors when examining the total sample.

When we carried separate regression for males and females, however, the patterns were quite different. While relationships were among the most important predictor for both genders, it appears that income was also important for both genders though in opposite directions (hence the small overall effect). Specifically, men tended to have lower life satisfaction the more

satisfied they were with their income while the relationship for women was positive. Clearly these analyses are based on small samples but they nonetheless raise interesting issues for future analyses of large datasets like the BHPS.

Table 2. **Predicting global life satisfaction from domain satisfaction**

	Total (βs)	Males βs	Females βs
Health	.17	.12	-.23
Income	.05	-.51	.38
Leisure	.14	.11	-.29
Relationships	.57	.49	.81
R^2_{adj}	.39	.74	.65

In addition to the quantitative analysis, we also conducted thematic analysis of the « thinking aloud » carried out while answering these questions. This is more informative given the paucity of existing data on what lies behind responses. One recurring theme was the trade-off between domains *e.g.* it was recognised that better leisure time and relationships would require less work and consequently less income. Aspects of the global satisfaction question beyond specific domains included the degree to which people had achieved personal goals or objectives and the fact that present circumstances were given a great deal of weight in the responses (*e.g.* « If you'd asked me last week I would be more satisfied… »).

Satisfaction with income appeared to be moderated by aspirations, which is consistent with the inferences made by other studies (as a good example, see Graham and Pettinato [2002]). Respondents with lower satisfaction tended to say things like « …everyone wants more money… » while those who were already fairly satisfied suggested that « people always wanted more and it was a case of want rather than need, and if you have more you spend more ».

3.1.2. Section B : Valuing changes in life satisfaction

Section B asked people to consider whether they would take a pill that guaranteed them an increase in life satisfaction by 1 point on the 1-7 scale, and if so what they would be prepared to pay for it both in money (assuming no side-effects) and amount of years of their life (if there were some side-effects). Only 5/20 people said they would take the pill. Two said they would be willing to pay £100 per month for the pill, the others said £50, £20 and £10 respectively. In terms of years of life to be traded for the pill, 4 people said they would be prepared to have their life shortened by 5 years and one (of the two willing to pay £100) said 6 years.

Thematic analysis of the comments made by those opting to take the pill suggested that as long as there were no side-effects, it was a good « quick fix » to the life satisfaction problem. Those who did not want to take the pill suggested that they would feel they would lose control over their understanding of their own lives and said things such as « Knowing why you are dissatisfied is important », « I would rather understand why I'm feeling what I'm feeling » and having a quick fix is « unnatural ». These results suggest that respondents may be adopting a long-term perspective to their well-being : a pill may work in the short run but it is not going to solve the underlying issues causing a low life satisfaction rating.

3.1.3. Section C : Life satisfaction if things changed

Section C asked respondents to rate various hypothetical combinations of health, social contact and income to investigate the relative weights they attach to these attributes. The mean rating when relationships are good compared to bad (irrespective of other circumstances) was 4.00 compared to 2.52. By contrast the differences between good and poor health (3.42 compared to 3.10) and high and low income (3.15 compared 3.37) were much smaller and even reversed in the case of income.

Another way of looking at these data is to see what happens when two states are good and the other is poor. When health and income are good but social contact poor, life satisfaction was predicted to be just 3.25 yet when health and social contact are good and income poor, life satisfaction was predicted to be 4.85. Finally, when income and social contact are good but health poor, life satisfaction is 4.05. Thus, just as with the collapsed means analysis above, social contact, then health and then income are rated by our respondents as the most important dimensions for life satisfaction.

Table 3. Trade-offs across domains

Conditions			Life satisfaction	
Health	Income	Social Contact	Mean	SD
Good	Good	Poor	3.25	(1.12)
Good	Poor	Good	4.85	(1.42)
Good	Poor	Poor	2.15	(1.09)
Poor	Good	Good	4.05	(1.64)
Poor	Good	Poor	2.15	(1.04)
Poor	Poor	Good	3.10	(1.25)

Comments made by respondents during the exercise largely support the quantitative analysis. For example, in discussing social contact, respondents said that they thought it was « the most important factor », that « no social contact is no life at all » and « what's the point of money if you've got no one to share it with ? » With regard to health, people saw ways of ameliorating the situation. For instance, as long as social networks were strong, others could help out and higher income would pay for better medical care. A number of respondents also asked what should count as « poor health ». With respect to money, respondents generally accepted that a lack of money « makes things more difficult » but this does not necessarily undermine satisfaction with life, which is « what you make of it ».

3.1.4. Section D : Feelings questions

In Section D, respondents were asked to describe their feelings over the past four weeks on a scale from « Happy and interested in life » (5), « Somewhat happy » (4), « Somewhat unhappy » (3), « Very unhappy » (2) and « So unhappy that life was not worth living » (1). The mean response was 3.95 ($SD = 0.89$).

We then asked respondents whether their answer to this question would have been different if we asked about the last 24 hours. Only 4 said their response would have been different, one said 2 points higher, two said one point lower and one said two points lower. For most people it may therefore not make much of a difference whether they are asked about the last month or yesterday, though there could still be some factors associated with particularly good or bad days that could affect things. Since these are likely to balance out across samples of people, the overall daily scores are likely to be relatively similar to the monthly ratings.

Respondents were then asked to assess the amount of time they spent in « a good mood », in « neither a good nor a bad mood » or « in a good mood » over the last four weeks. Overall, respondents thought they spent about half of their time in « good moods » (45.25 % ($SD = 20.49$)), a quarter of it in « bad moods » (26.50 % ($SD = 21.16$)) and the remaining quarter in « neither good nor bad moods » (28.25 % ($SD = 17.86$)). As might be expected, those who spent more time in positive moods were generally happier overall. Seven respondents said that their responses would have been different in they had been asked about yesterday. Their comments primarily reported an especially bad moment the day before which was lingering in their minds, *e.g.* « I would normally put somewhat happy but... ».

Insofar as respondents focus on the more negative aspects of more recent events, it is possible that daily reports of affect (e.g. as captured by methods like the day reconstruction method (DRM ; Kahneman *et al.*, 2004)) would reflect worse moods than reports of affect over longer periods. Having said this, it is noteworthy that the amount of time in a bad mood for the last four weeks comes quite close to the amount of time in a bad mood reported for the DRM (Kahneman *et al.*, 2006) ; that is, around a quarter of the time.

3.1.5. Section E : Determinants of satisfaction and happiness questions

According to some authors, our happiness is roughly 50 % determined by genetic factors such as our personality, 10 % by our external circumstances and 40 % by the activities we engage in (*e.g.* Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). So in this section we explored whether or not ordinary people tended to come up with a similar attributional distribution. By and large, the answer seems to be that they have similar beliefs about the relative importance of activities (41 % ($SD = 23.05$)) but they believe the role of objective circumstances (38.75 % ($SD = 21.39$)) is more important than that of genetics (20.25 % ($SD = 19.16$)).

The remaining questions in this section asked about the degree to which people believed they were responsible for the circumstances and activities and outlook that determine our happiness (– 3 « Not responsible » to + 3 « Totally responsible »). The results suggest that respondents thought that the degree of happiness derived from both circumstances ($M = 2.10$ ($SD = 0.72$)) and activities and outlook ($M = 2.25$ ($SD = 0.72$)) were largely the responsibility of people themselves. Note also the low amount of variance in these responses suggesting similar beliefs across respondents.

3.1.6. Section F : Attitudes to policy questions

In this section, we explored more directly what people felt about potential policies relating to wellbeing. The possible options were to directly promote happiness, to reduce misery, to provide information about what makes people happy, to increase the choice in public services, to promote certain default options, to enforce compulsory pension contributions and to redistribute income (– 3 « strongly disagree » to + 3 « strongly agree »).

Respondents felt that the government should make pension contributions compulsory and should also be promoting those options which may help us to improve our happiness (both 1.25). They seemed rather ambivalent about the government's role as regards promoting greater choice, providing more information or reducing misery (.15,.10 & .05 respectively) and marginally against trying directly to improve happiness and redistribute income (both -.35).

Thematic analysis provided an interesting take on a well-known phenomenon in psychology, namely a positive bias for the self. In this instance, it manifested itself in people saying that they knew what was best for their own happiness and therefore they should have choice. They doubted, however, whether other people were also able to make sensible choices and thus defaults and so on were necessary for « others » but not the « self ». This « better than average effect » has been shown to affect all kinds of personal behaviours but very few papers have considered its importance for policy options (Dolan *et al.* [2010]).

3.2. Study 2

3.2.1. Section A : Satisfaction questions

In line with Study 1 and now much more in line with the BHPS, respondents in Study 2 had relatively high global levels of life satisfaction ($M = 5.26$ ($SD = 1.32$)). Building on the lessons from the first study, we presented a number of possible reasons and time frames that may have informed responses. From Table 4, we can see that personal relationships and lifestyle (reflecting activities and outlook) come through strongly. Most respondents seem to look backwards when assessing life satisfaction, and they mostly look backwards quite a way.

Table 4. Reasons and time frame used in life satisfaction judgements

Reasons for answer	
My job was the main reason for my answer	3
My personal relationships was the main reason for my answer	12
My health was the main reason for my answer	1
My lifestyle was the main reason for my answer	13
Something else – please state what: - "*Combination of all reasons*"	2
Time frame thought about	
What has happened in the last few weeks	4
What has happened in the last year	4
What has happened in the last few years	7
What has happened in my life so far	12
What I think things are going to be like from now on	2
Some other time frame - please state what: - "*Now*" - "*None in particular*"	2

3.2.2. Section B : Policy questions

This time, we standardised the policy related questions so that all respondents are asked about the degree to which they agree that each goal was the « main goal » of policy (– 3 Strongly disagree to + 3 Strongly agree). The specific goals we asked about concerned the provision of good quality public services ($M = 2.42$ ($SD = 0.92$)) and choice in these services ($M = 1.58$ ($SD = 1.20$)), support social ties and networks ($M = 0.71$ ($SD = 1.47$)), improvements in happiness ($M = 0.26$ ($SD = 1.75$)) and reductions in misery ($M = -0.03$ ($SD = 1.58$)).

Consistent with the findings of Study 1, the respondents also believed that government should focus on the provision of public services and choice within these services over directly trying to influence happiness and reduce misery. Supporting social ties and networks was also positively evaluated (a goal not explored in Study 1) which suggests interventions in this area may be seen as politically legitimate. The thoughts behind the responses can be seen in Table 6.

Table 5. Reasons for policy judgements

Providing public services	
Good public services will make people happier and this is why they are important	2
Good public services are important in their own right	11
Good public services will improve the quality of people's lives	17
Something else – please state what: - "*law and order and immigration*"	1
Improving Happiness	
This is what all policies are ultimately about	4
It is the down to individuals to make themselves happy, not governments	13
A nice idea in theory but not feasible in practice	10
Something else	4
Reduce misery	
This is what all policies are ultimately about	2
It is down to individuals to reduce their misery, not governments	12
A nice idea in theory but not feasible in practice as people are too different	13
Something else	4

Respondents generally believe that public services are important in their own right and that they will help improve people's quality of life. In relation to happiness and misery reduction, respondents either seemed to believe that it was up to individuals themselves to find their own happiness or that, while these policies might be nice in theory, they are currently impractical policy goals.

So, on the one hand, many respondents would seem to be against « happiness policy » but, on the other hand, many others would give it a chance if only the suitable policies could be developed.

4. Discussion

There has been over 2000 years worth of debate about the relative merits of the different accounts and measures of wellbeing for policy purposes. Whilst there is increasing conceptual clarity and advances in measurement, this debate is unlikely to be fully resolved in the next 2000 years. It can, however, be approached differently. We could ask stakeholders – including the general population whose lives will be affected by policy decisions – what they make of it all. This includes getting behind the numbers of responses to the subjective measures that are likely to play a more prominent role in policy analysis (Stiglitz *et al.* [2009]).

The studies reported here represent a small contribution to an empirical research agenda designed to find out what goes into wellbeing reports and the appropriateness for policy analysis of what comes out. We must be of course be cautious about over-interpreting the responses from such small, convenience samples but the results raise a number of issues about how people answer these questions and their thoughts about government policy, and they do suggest possible avenues for more comprehensive research in the future.

Whilst it is possible to establish the various domain satisfactions (health, work etc. that are associated with life satisfaction, from which personal relationships emerges as an important determinant (Dolan *et al.* [2008]), it is interesting to show that respondents *think that* relationships are important in explaining their overall life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was also expected to change most in response to changes in social capital than in response to changes in health or income.

Of interest to those who may wish to use life satisfaction to reflect SWB over some duration (*e.g.* for use in calculating quality-adjusted life years or happiness-adjusted life years [Veenhoven, 2005]) is the time frame that respondents have in mind. It appears that responses are retrospective assessments of how life has gone thus far, or at least how the last few years have gone. Further work is certainly required to test the robustness of this particular finding.

It is noteworthy that most respondents would be reluctant to take a pill to improve their life satisfaction, and this is potentially consistent with the

ideas of Nozick [1974] that people would prefer the authenticity of real life to the induced and artificial happiness from a pill (or experience machine). Nozick argues that we are concerned with having a *real* experience in addition to wanting the feelings associated with the experience.

There is a long philosophical tradition, dating back to Aristotle, of valuing objectives in life quite separately from their impact upon happiness or life satisfaction. For example, freedom, truth, beauty, knowledge may be seen as important ends in themselves, not necessarily reflected in life satisfaction and potentially undermined by « artificial » increases in life satisfaction. Our concerns can include « substantive goods » as well the quality of our « mental states » (Scanlon [1993]). Whilst life satisfaction ratings can reflect more than the quality of mental states, respondents may nonetheless have thought of the pill as « mind altering ».

There are some serious problems with thought experiments of the kind asked for in this study, not least because we cannot detach ourselves from all the real baggage that comes from trying to think in these ways e.g. the pill is *bound to* have some side effects. Nevertheless it would interesting to explore whether the same findings hold for pills that improve daily affect, which are more easily imagined than those that improve life satisfaction.

It is noteworthy for those considering the barriers and drivers to public acceptance of SWB measures in policy that respondents attribute a good deal more of our happiness to circumstances than the evidence would suggest. In addition to concerns about personal responsibility, this would go some way towards explaining high levels of support for public services *e.g.* in healthcare.

In thinking about the role of happiness in public policy, respondents were also generally in favour of providing good public services and perhaps promoting the conditions for happiness rather than focussing on happiness itself. Consistent with views about personal responsibility, many did not think the government should not be responsible for promoting happiness directly. Interestingly, and contrary to our expectations, no distinction was made between « reducing misery » and « promoting happiness ».

The results from this study means that we can, to some extent at least, « hit the ground running » with larger-scale, more representative follow-up studies. It would certainly be interesting to explore further, for example, the difference between « misery » and « happiness » in the context of debates about public policy and to observe how people respond – and how (if at all) their responses change – when presented with some of the key findings on the determinants of happiness.

This study itself does provide some useful further insights. In particular, a large tranche of respondents were against happiness as a goal of policy for a very different reason to responsibility : namely, their belief that people are too different for policies to actually make any difference. Convincing people like these of the merits of policies designed to improve SWB requires the design of good policies and the development of good measures. There is still much that needs to be done on both fronts.

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