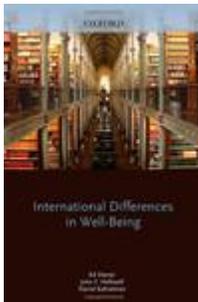


A Blueprint for Exploring International Differences in Well-Being

A review of



International Differences in Well-Being

by Ed Diener, John Helliwell, and Daniel Kahneman (Eds.)

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010. 512 pp. ISBN

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Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman's *International Differences in Well-Being* is a compilation that will inspire well-being researchers to question the generalizability of their theoretical assumptions and the precision with which they have measured their constructs. We believe the chapters in this book will motivate researchers to construe their scientific findings in a variety of ways—for example, to rethink how they measure well-being and the correlates generated by such measures, both between and within cultures. Furthermore, the book is likely to prompt scientists to view their results through a multicontextual lens—a lens that may suggest innovative ideas that ultimately will advance and expand the reach of the science of well-being.

Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman have organized their book into three sections: (a) Measuring Well-Being in an International Context, (b) International Comparisons of Income and Well-Being Through Time, and (c) International Differences in the Social Context of Well-Being. They acknowledge, however, that these three themes are present throughout the book.

The editors have assembled an impressive group of authors and researchers from an array of fields (e.g., economics, psychology, sociology, public policy, and political science) and settings (e.g., residents of myriad nations and employees of a range of organizations, including universities, RAND Corporation, and Gallup) to contribute to the broad topic of well-being within and across countries. The authors' diversity shines through in the range of perspectives and methodologies represented in the collection of chapters.

A major strength of the book is its attention to measurement issues that may arise when exploring well-being variables within and between a diverse set of nations. Many of the points presented regarding measurement are not only important in international research but can also be applied to research in any context.

For example, several of the authors underscore the importance of measuring the affective component of well-being (e.g., "Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?") separately from the life evaluation component (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your life in general?"), as their research reveals different results and qualitative conclusions depending on which well-being variables are used (Deaton, Fortson, and Tortora; Diener, Kahneman, Tov, and Arora; Di Tella and MacCulloch; Graham, Chattopadhyay, and Picon; Kahneman, Schkade, Fischler, Krueger, and Krilla; Oishi).

Beyond the affective versus life evaluation distinction, Oishi, Graham et al., and Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, and Huang also present issues regarding how specific questions are framed. For example, Graham and her colleagues and Helliwell and his colleagues point out that Cantril's Ladder of Life, a life satisfaction measure used in the Gallup World Poll, appears to steer people to evaluate their life in comparison with others, as it asks respondents to compare their lives to "the best possible life" (the top rung of the ladder) and the "worst possible life" (the bottom rung of the ladder). Precisely how such a question is presented or framed is pivotal, as the Cantril measure manifests a stronger relationship with income than more open-ended questions about life satisfaction or questions related to affect (Diener et al.; Graham et al.; Helliwell et al.).

Several of the authors also focus on critical issues regarding international (or between-country) comparisons (Diener et al.; Kapteyn, Smith, and van Soest; Oishi). For example, Diener and his colleagues find that the between-nation share of variance for their affect balance measure is as low as 0.06, whereas the between-nation share of variance for their measure of life satisfaction is over 0.25. This finding suggests that inhabitants of different countries tend to share similar or universal emotions yet, at the same time, differ in their life circumstances and global satisfaction with life. Another example highlighted in the book is that American participants are more likely to mark the extreme ends of Likert scales than are

Taiwanese and Japanese (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995, as cited in Oishi's chapter) or Dutch participants (Kapteyn, Smith, and van Soest); hence, standardizing between-country variables may be necessary to make equivalent comparisons.

Another principal strength of *International Differences in Well-Being* is that, regardless of their field of study, the methodologies described in its chapters can serve as a framework for researchers who want to analyze data from some of the world's largest and most diverse survey databases, including the Gallup World Poll, the World Values Survey, the World Database of Happiness, the Eurobarometer, and the Latinobarometer. The authors of each chapter thoroughly report the data analysis methods they use and the types of conclusions they draw based on their individual approaches. Although the analyses employed may be complicated and the datasets vast, readers are provided with valuable notes and appendices to help them reconstruct the findings and, if desired, expand the methodologies to study other areas.

The crux of the research described in the book addresses the link between income and well-being, featuring arguments on all sides of the debate surrounding the so-called Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin, 1974). The term originates from a widely cited paper in which Easterlin (1974) described his counterintuitive finding that, although people with higher incomes are happier, changes in income within a country are not associated with changes in happiness. In addition, mean levels of well-being across countries are generally not correlated with the countries' per capita gross domestic product (i.e., wealthier countries are not happier; Easterlin, 1974).

The focus on the Easterlin Paradox in the book is not surprising, reflecting as it does the enormous research interest and attention drawn by the moderators and mediators underlying the relationship between wealth and happiness. To date, this is the one topic in the area of well-being that has been studied the most thoroughly on an international level. Because of the attention attracted by the Easterlin Paradox debate, the editors and chapter authors have been able to cover the subject comprehensively and in great detail.

As the reader progresses through the book, it becomes clear, as Diener and colleagues freely admit, that the "debate [is] best regarded as unsettled" (p. xvi). Each chapter takes a slightly different approach to exploring the Easterlin Paradox and adds something new to the discussion. Many authors introduce potentially important social factors that affect the link between income and well-being, including demographics (Diener et al.; Kahneman et al.; Helliwell et al.), adaptation to income beyond basic needs (Di Tella and MacCulloch), social comparison (Layard, Mayraz, and Nickell), social capital (Helliwell et al.), and freedom and religion (Inglehart).

For example, an illustration of the complexity of the Easterlin Paradox appears in Layard and colleagues' chapter, which explores the role of relative versus absolute income in its relationship to well-being in "advanced" countries. They found that perceived relative income (i.e., "Compared with other American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above

average?"; p. 163) is a better predictor of happiness than either absolute income or average income in the same household type. Such findings demonstrate that further research into the social and psychological factors surrounding income may begin to clarify the much studied relationship between income and well-being.

The third and final section of the book highlights additional social context variables that have been linked to well-being on an international level. Religion, perceived job fit, job characteristics, employment status, and hours worked in the last week and yesterday all have been linked to well-being across countries, with the strength of the relationship (and, in a few cases, the direction of the relationship) differing across countries. For example, Harter and Arora report that the number of hours worked in a day negatively affects positive emotions in all regions except Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, where having work may be seen as a luxury as opposed to a burden.

It is interesting that both the introduction and a couple of the chapters in this section highlight that what constitutes a "good life" seems to be relatively similar across cultures, such that the differences found between countries in well-being can likely be attributed to real differences in social and life circumstances (Helliwell et al.; Veenhoven). This section should stimulate further research on international differences *and* similarities in the links between happiness and social factors.

Some may argue that the title *International Differences in Well-Being* is too broad in light of the narrow scope of much of the research included. We believe, however, that the methodologies employed potentially have broad implications, beyond the book's focus on the link between income and well-being and even beyond the science of well-being as a whole. The tremendous amount of data stored in international databases such as the Gallup World Poll and the World Values Survey lends itself to the study of numerous questions regarding the role of social and demographic factors in well-being. Furthermore, most of these surveys have now been administered in a diverse set of nations, which makes meaningful international comparisons possible.

This book is highly recommended to anyone hoping to pursue research on well-being in an international context or planning to analyze international survey databases. Now that Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman and their featured authors have laid the blueprint for how to conduct this type of work, we expect the floodgates to open on research on international differences (and similarities) in well-being.

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